

Drift Patterns

A Collective Journal

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Alexander Koch, 1/30/2014

The machine hums: A squeaking hum, a vaguely calming hum that puts me in a mind to sleep. But the room is full of other patients, nurses, guests... and the hum of their conversation is a roar that won't allow me respite. Snippets of conversation reach my ears, and one lady's voice more than others, and to my right is what I am fairly certain is Hindi being spoken. That, slipping through all the English, is vaguely calming as well. "Artichoke"... fragments of discussion begin tangents in my thoughts.

It is a process to re-adjust the reclining chair in which they put me. My legs aren't strong enough to push the footrest down. Pillow behind my head, blanket on my lap, I feel weaker than I look. And every time I check the mirror I still surprise myself at how drawn and weak I appear. My face so thin!

But, I am awake. The voices are beginning to sound like no more than blackflies in the Maine summer – they are annoying for certain, but able to be ignored for brief moments. It is in these moments I again have my thoughts.

Beep. Beep. Beep. The machine is now alerting the nurse to change over the med bag, which sends the chemotherapy through tubing and my mediport into my veins. It is a quick disturbance, and then the calm of the hum returns. I write...

Songbirds

In an empty tree

Empty of leaves

Empty of berries

Empty of summer

The sun shines bright

Made brighter by the white

Of reflective snow

Playfully the birds flit

From branch to branch

Oblivious of their barren

Perch.

To me there is a sadness

As I watch them

I am inside

Getting my bi-weekly chemotherapy

And wishing I had

A barren winter playland

As they do.

Jill Miller, 2/1/2014

Of Crabs and Coffee

I spent much of this past week working on an attitude adjustment. Yes, my birth date makes me a Cancer, but somehow, it doesn't make crabiness my birthright. Cold weather, long work hours, lack of exercise, traffic jams, monotony and the drab winter palette all seem to leach cheerfulness and patience from my bones.

I cringe to recall how I've dealt with some people in a less than pleasant manner recently. Awful and despicable behavior, no; impatience verging on rudeness, yes. I'd like to think I'm better than that. Where's my gratitude? What results would I get if I looked at every person as a potential solution, instead of a problem? And what about all the time I spend marinating in my own glum thoughts, ruining my own day. How much more energy would I have if I shook it off, instead of letting a bad mood weigh me down?

Attitude often affects outcomes. All week, I've been trying to be more mindful of my choice of reactions—to think before I snap, seethe, huff or glower. So how did it go?

Not so well when I called the HR department of a former employer who, inexplicably, withheld only \$1 in state taxes on my W2--and also sent me a W2 meant for somebody else. Thinking of them as incompetent bozos (however true it may be) was not the right mindset, I realized, after leaving a rather grumpy and perhaps sarcastic voicemail. My message wasn't returned, so I'll get a do-over, sort of, next time I call.

Presently, I spend my workdays delivering packages in a rural area. It's not my customers' faults that their addresses defy logic. They could help by putting their numbers on their mailboxes or houses, to be sure. Those that don't, I feel quite justified cussing out in the privacy of my van as time flies by—sometimes forty minutes or more—as I search for someone who orders things, but apparently doesn't want to be found.

I used to feel the thrill of the hunt; every wild goose chase was "research". The bloom has worn off, I guess, and frustration put me in an especially foul mood one morning. As long as it took to find the right house, it took even longer to stop grumbling and remember that it's my job. It's about more than just driving; it's about having the wits to figure out Where in the World is Waldo Smith, Rural Route 1, Box 176A. And for what it's worth, my employer recognizes that I'm good at it.

It's not easy rearranging my thought process. But I can point to several instances where I did do better. And I believe my change in attitude earned some positive results.

Without whining, I persisted in getting a replacement hand-held scanner at work; it was missing a hand-strap and plastic stylus—two low-tech features that seem trivial, unless you're the one carrying boxes up stairs and asking customers to sign the little screen. All three of my requests fell on deaf and uncaring ears, it seemed to me. Yet on Friday morning, I found a fully-equipped scanner with my name on it. Victory!

At 5:30 one morning, I was grateful to have a Starbucks gift card on me, even if I roll my eyes at \$2.50 for a large—excuse me, venti—unsweetened black coffee. It's a very rare indulgence, perfect for a cold, blustery morning. Only the lid didn't fit, and il venti quickly ventilated all its precious heat. Grrr.

The next morning, I hit the Starbucks drive-through again. After placing my order I asked (without a trace of complaint in my voice) And oh yes, would they mind checking to make sure the lid fits tightly? I pulled around with the gift card ready. "This one's on us," the barista said, as he handed me 20 ounces of heavenly, steaming hot, caffeinated brew. "You had some problem with the lid, I take it? Yeah, we've had some issues with those, very sorry about that!" My already-free coffee was even more free—sweet!

That was unexpected, but having worked in retail before, I know very well that a customer's bad attitude will get them nowhere fast.

I'm grateful that someone reinforced my belief that simply being nice can have real rewards. Still, it will take daily practice. Crabbiness is characterized by being too much in one's own shell—being self-absorbed, edging sideways, snapping at the world. In time, Spring will wave her wand, and I'll re-emerge from my shell. In the meantime, there's strong coffee.

Matt Fitzwater-Stevens, 2/1/2014

We just had *that* conversation on the phone with the vet. We asked the question that you ask when you're pretty sure you already know the answer.

Human beings are demigods when it comes to the creatures who share our world. Many of the thoughtless cruelties that damn humanity spring from people's failure to realize that gods have responsibilities. Some of those duties are hard.

One of the hardest duties is to take a creature you love, and who loves you, and try to see clearly where the line is between love-filled life and painful struggle. Although the animal can speak eloquently, she can't speak analytically. You know she has an ailment that is killing her, that no one can cure. You've been seeing her weight drop, no matter how creative you get with purées and flavors and persuasion. You've been noting, with fear, how those hocking, growling attempts to swallow past that inoperable tumor have expanded from meals into the rest of her day. But you can't quite tell when she's closer to death than life.

I've never had an old pet before. This is a new duty for me. As a human, in this society and in the religious tradition in which I was raised, life is something you fight for to the last, scorched-earth style, even though your body is the battlefield you're laying waste. You don't get to duck out, or even let others duck out.

Now, I have this new duty--to figure out when to gracefully balance life with pain, and judge when to end life. It is my duty because I am this creature's god. I volunteered to be a god. She did not volunteer to be my acolyte. Thus, I owe her good judgment and mercy.

It is confusing to me, but it makes sense. It will temper my sadness and horror, a few days from now, when I watch her die at my command.

Sara Stewart, 2/2/2014

The Fourteen Stages of Celebrity Death, on the Internet

Philip Seymour Hoffman died today. It was very sad. I find that my thought process, when a public death like this occurs, tends to follow similar patterns. Today's went like this.

-Philip Seymour Hoffman died? That can't be right. I can't link to the story. Clearly, this is a hoax.

-OK, now it's being reported by the Post. Does that count as a real source? I guess so. Shit.

-He died of an overdose? They found a needle in his fucking arm? That's awful. And a cliché, to boot.

-He had kids? Waiting for him to pick them up? What an asshole.

-No, it's sad, it's sad. It's a disease. I know.

-Wow, there are a lot of tweets about him. I should probably read as many of them as I can. Out of respect?

-OK, enough already with the death one-upmanship.

-I feel guilty about thinking people's rampant death-shock tweets are showy and fake. But I still think it.

-I can't believe that guy is dead. I just saw him schlumping around New York, like, a few weeks ago. Death. DEATH.

-Seriously, though, enough already. Everyone is sad about him. Obviously. We don't all need to say it out loud. Can't anyone grieve non-publicly anymore?

-Does it mean I don't care if I didn't say anything public about it myself? Should I say something? What could I possibly say that hasn't been said?

-I'll just go with an RIP.

-I am part of the problem.

-DEATH.

Baxter Tocher, 2/3/2014

In high school, my friends and I all listened to the same music. It was either progressive rock or krautrock: Emerson, Lake and Palmer, Soft Machine, Van der Graaf Generator, Faust, Ashra, Can, Neu. Music for the mind.

It wasn't like we ran some kind of a closed shop, of course. Occasionally someone would bring an LP in (we could only buy music on vinyl then) and ask "what d'you think?" We'd borrow albums from each other, play them over and over and over again and learn them back to front, then pass them on. We knew every solo, every chord progression, every dynamic shift. It was as if it had all somehow been burned into our heads.

We could also listen in the “music house”, a building adjacent to but separate from the main high school building. Separate was important. Our music teacher was very liberal. She’d allow us to listen to whatever we wanted, as long as we were happy to discuss it with her. She was way beyond the standard classical/choral teachers of the time. We did Bach, sure. And we did ELP. We discussed, we analyzed. We were bewitched.

After finishing high school, we’d listen to Steve Hillage, National Health, PFM. We’d go see some of them play live. Then XTC and Killing Joke arrived. We saw them play live too. Musical boundaries were pushed forward. Music for the body! Passionate, fun days.

This was the music I was brought up with. I still enjoy listening to all of it now, too. But there’s one major snag: I missed out on an incredible amount of excellent music.

Ten to fifteen years ago, when the second round of CDs started to appear (and by this, I mean those that the major record labels had taken time out to fully remaster, rather than simply repackage), I started to fill what at the time seemed to me to be the most significant gaps. I bought the remastered catalogue of Tangerine Dream, John Martyn, Fairport Convention, John Mayall, Cream, Jack Bruce, Mike Oldfield, Black Sabbath, The Band, the Beach Boys, Roxy Music and others. So much goodness I’d missed!

But missing from the vast collection of music I’d amassed over many years was Jimi Hendrix. How could that even be? And even now, I remember that the first time I listened to the remastered “Are You Experienced” CD, in 1997, I wept. I really did. It was as if the engineers had somehow managed to transport that trio through time and space, into my house, into my amplifier, and through my speakers. It was magical. Eyes closed, there they were, so incredibly fresh, vibrant and - dammit! - alive.

Then: The Beatles. So, how did that lapse happen? Fortunately, two box sets, “The Beatles” and “The Beatles in Mono” were released in 2009. Of course, I bought them both. Then, just two weeks ago, “The U.S. Albums” box set was issued. I bought that too. I’m struggling to get my head around the track listings of the early American releases; they’re radically different from the UK versions. But sound quality and energy? Hell, yes.

So, I’m now making my way through the 47-disc (forty-seven!) box set of “Bob Dylan: The Complete Album Collection, Volume 1”. My wife gave me this as a gift at Christmas, and I’m loving every damn moment of it too. Boy, am I making up for lost time...

Anita Fitzwater-Stevens, 2/4/2014

How much does the way we handle death say about us? My cat, Sable, died last week. Quietly and easily in my arms, wrapped in a red blanket, while my husband and I petted

her and cried. We chose to euthanize her after it became obvious that she was suffering more than she wasn't suffering. Such a choice, regardless of the tears that accompany it, carries with it a certain practicality. You weigh it out. All your love of the creature, all the years together—somehow, they help to add to the side in favor of euthanizing.

And yet, we humans still view death with fear, trepidation. We code it in softer language because we fear it so. Years ago, after losing my grandmother and one of my dearest friends, I made a conscious choice to avoid such softening in language. But I returned to it with Sable.

Something in this loss, my power and choice in it made it impossible for me to use anything that carried such firmness as simply saying she died. At least until sitting down to write this and, even now, it feels indicative of coldness. Couple that with the pragmatism of the choice of euthanasia and perhaps it just adds up to too much.

Death is a departure for realms unknown or even merely imaginary. I find that language choices either recast it or solidify it. So, ultimately, how we choose to do that says quite a lot about us and our independent experience at each point in time.

Thomas Park, 2/5/2014

For many years, I focused only on making music. I always wanted to be a musician--sure, the image, money (maybe), and there was something mystical about making sounds. The urge to become a "guru" of some kind has often motivated me.

That's easier said than done. Years of experience go into becoming an expert at something. Good and bad events pass by-- and lessons that can be hard to accept.

I do think that progress can be found in my music making. In the beginning, I let machines write for me. Fractals, mathematics-- I even harvested root numbers for songs from plants and multiplication tables.

There was a period when I took field recordings and effected them. Literally scores of pieces were creating using one small tool- a shortwave radio. A reviewer called this "hack" work. I called it sculpting sound.

A more proper ambient period followed, with some longform and some shorter pieces. A friend inspired me to try using my own acoustic sounds. I purchased a trombone (my school days instrument of choice), and a bag full of smaller instruments like kazoos, slide whistles, shakers and so forth. Some good stuff came from this period, though intonation was a problem.

If there was a uniting factor in 95% of this work, it was that it lacked something. It was

all a bit soulless. I think that's why I never became more popular (that and being too prolific).

Meeting my fiancée changed the music completely. There was less time to make it. I also had the urge to pursue more optimistic, lively sounds. Hopeful sounds. I was tired of solipsistic dirges.

At one point, I considered actually apologizing for my earlier works, hoping that I did not depress people. I know that music can really affect moods, and I wanted them to know that I could not really sound happier until I felt happier.

Presently, though I still believe in music, it is a little too pure a medium for me. I'd like to branch out. I enjoy writing, graphics work, and have always wanted to be a painter.

Adri Holt, 2/7/2014

My husband and I have been on Washington since Tuesday and compared to Saint Louis, Washington, D.C. is a much, much bigger place. Anyway, my husband, Ben, likes to make it a point on our vacations to eat at hole-in-the-wall type joints, nothing that is a chain (like McDonald's). Unfortunately, to my husband's dismay, I'm a bit of a picky eater. So the first eating place that we went to was a pizza place. It's called Fuel pizza and we definitely enjoyed our triple bacon calzone (you could choose what toppings went into it) and their garlic knots paired with their red sauce (possibly marinara or pizza sauce, not sure, they give it to you with your meal) was absolutely delicious and we left happy and filled.

For breakfast on the 2nd day, we went to the Lincoln waffle shop, would not recommend. It's nothing fancy and overpriced for what you get. Ben had a plain waffle and country fried steak (he was not happily surprised that it had brown gravy instead of white). The chocolate chip waffle I had was not what I expected either, I had thought that the chocolate chips would be baked into the waffle instead of just placed half-hazardly on the waffle. The bacon was good but pretty greasy and flimsy. I would say the only good thing about it is that it's right next to Ford's theatre (where Lincoln was shot) and at the Peterson house (where Lincoln died). Lunch on Wednesday was at Potbelly's Sandwich Works and it was pretty good. I had a turkey breast original (just turkey and Swiss cheese on it) with loaded potato soup and for dessert a chocolate brownie cookie. The sandwich was good (nothing special), I've had better loaded potato soup (check out O'Charleys for that), but, that cookie thing was phenomenal! It melted in your mouth. The only sad thing about it was that I had to share with my husband. *laugh* Ben had a pizza sandwich, which he thought was yummy (my words, not his). But the coffee place (cafe Phillips) we went to, which also sells breakfast/lunch food, but

the cafe mocha that I ordered was amazing. Once it cooled off enough for me to drink it, I didn't put it down until it was gone. My husband also enjoyed his chai latte. Ooh! I forgot that they also have this little pastry called a rugalach which was covered in what I assume is salt and filled with a chocolate paste. I'm glad we got two or else I wouldn't have shared, actually I would have, but that's neither here nor there. Thursday morning was a place called the wicked waffle; it has humongous tubs of Nutella in its window. The waffle that I got was the Nutella waffle, which was slathered in Nutella then sprinkled with powder sugar on top. My husband enjoyed the bites he took of it, I think even more so than his bacon, egg, and cheese waffle (the bacon, egg, and cheese were fitted between a waffle bent in half). Hopefully we will be returning there before we leave Washington, D.C. I am a big fan of sushi (weird of a picky eater, right?). There's a little hole-in-the-wall place called Sushi Express that's located at 1900 K St on the upper level. We ordered tuna roll, sashimi (an assortment is salmon, chunks of tuna, mackerel, red snapper, and some octopus), plum roll, onagri (rice ball), Chesapeake roll, Crazy roll, fried shrimp dumplings (normally called shumai), and it came with some white rice and miso soup. Everything was delicious! I was happy to find a place that had cheap sushi, can't find that in Cape Girardeau. The only disappointment I had was that the plum roll was spicy (my palette cannot deal with that). Overall I would recommend. The last place of note that you should try if you're in the area is Al Carbon's which is cereal & South American food. Normally I am not a fan of this type of food but Ben picked the place, after I've chosen everywhere else, so after 11 stops on the metro, we arrived. I ordered two pupusas (corn tortillas filled with beans & cheese, pork & cheese, or just cheese--which is what I chose, surprise, surprise). I cut it open with my fork and it just oozed cheese (always a good sign) and I paired it with ketchup instead of the given hot sauce, it was absolutely delectable! Ben agreed it was delish. He got the arepa (corn cake filled with shredded beef, but you can also get beans or chicken) and he thought it was ok. Ben said that mine was better. Although we did order the typical breakfast and bagel (bacon, egg, and cheese on it), the woman must've misunderstood that we ordered both things (the arepa and Pupusa as well) because she did not bring us our bagel and typical breakfast. So, after awhile Ben finally agreed with me that she wasn't going to bring us those orders. So we paid and left. I guess if you're going there, make sure she knows what you're ordering. Our experience in Washington, D.C.'s food places has been more than we could've expected to enjoy the 4 out of 6 places that we tried. The U***** app has been more than helpful with our food experiences because it tells you how cheap, how close, reviews of the eatery, and usually the menu. If you have a smart phone and are going on vacation then definitely download the U***** app.

Nathan Carter, 2/7/2014

ANALYSIS OF THE PRISONER

[A FRAGMENT]

It is a sign of the times that not only are conspiracy theorists and radio personalities frequently using terms such as "Orwellian", "1984", and "Big Brother" when describing first-world societies and governments, but the average individual as well. This of course is understandable, given the many revelations (both recent and otherwise) concerning the unprecedented erosion of civil liberties and the enduring power of Orwell's work (specifically "Nineteen Eighty-Four" and to a lesser extent "Animal Farm"). But you rarely, if ever, hear someone remark "This reminds me of something from 'The Prisoner'". This is something of a tragedy, in my opinion, although not completely unexpected, due to the show's many peculiarities and idiosyncratic elements (which also are its biggest draw). Regardless, a show which dealt with the dangers of advancing technologies, mind control, altered states of mind, indoctrination, mass/persistent surveillance, political intrigue, and the eternal struggle of the individual versus the collective can only become more relevant as long as certain societal trends continue in the course they are currently headed.

Briefly, the main premise of "The Prisoner" is that, after a successful career, a British intelligence agent suddenly resigns from his position. Upon returning home, he is promptly ambushed and gassed. Upon awakening, he finds himself on his living room couch. However, upon opening his front door, he is shocked to discover that he has been kidnapped and placed in a community known only as "The Village", a place where people are kept in order to extract certain information from them. In this case, his captors wish to know why the agent (whom is never named in the series, but is given the designation "Number 6") suddenly resigned. Aside from not knowing who the prisoners and who are the guardians, the village is also guarded by an enigmatic spherical orb known as "Rover", which is able to instantly incapacitate and/or absorb people in the village. The show mainly focusses on Number 6's attempts at escape, in addition to determine the motives of his captors (which also tend to be nebulous) and ultimately, the identity of "Number 1" (whom he does eventually determine, though who it is might surprise you).

While this premise might sound as though it would either be overly campy (which was always a possibility given that it was recorded in the late 1960's), too preachy, or perhaps too reminiscent of James Bond, instead it is a deeply thoughtful exploration in the determination of one individual versus many obstacles, and the series maintains a subtle humor and surreal presentation throughout (in addition to quite a few lava lamps). Also, unlike the 'traditional' spy thriller, the hero isn't a womanizer and no one is intentionally killed by the protagonist throughout the series.

The New Neighbors

It was almost a year ago that our new neighbors moved in up the road and it did not take long for us to become friends. The wife, Liz, was the owner of the new yoga studio that was set to open in town. Kate and I looked at this as a game changer. It is what we needed for ourselves and what we felt the town needed, too. We love our little vacation town on the river, but with so many of the local businesses not designed to service locals, it was nice to see one that was focused on the year rounder's.

We went to the studio's open house which is where we met Liz and her husband Adam in addition to a slew of new age-ie locals that seemingly came out of the woods for the event. The local dreadlocks were in attendance and the aroma of patchouli and fresh marijuana permeated the air. Liz was grounded and fairly normal by our town standards while Adam was a little more aloof despite his Connecticut roots. They have one kid, who was shy with strangers and at the same time curious and smiley. While we know quite a few people with kids but are friends with only a few of them. These people are really the first couple we started hanging out with where baby sitter schedules had any impact on our lives.

After a few chance meetings out and about, we arranged a night out for drinks. It was fun. They are a bit different than us as far as their priorities are concerned and they were clearly easy prey for the Hope and Change pitch of the last two elections. Anyway, after a few outings we got invited to their home for dinner and drinks. They have a splendid house that Kate and I were a little envious of, to be honest.

After dinner and a couple drinks, it was time for the tot to be put to bed. It was nice finally being able to carry on adult conversation with our interruptions. After a little while though, I found myself wishing for the kid was still up and able to provide a distraction. Liz can put away drinks and does a fair job of holding her liquor to a point. After that point, she becomes almost sexually predatory. All she wanted to do was get naked and get into the hot tub. Kate and I looked at each other, surprised. Nothing she had ever said or done before had given us any warning. After declining politely several times, Adam managed to steer the conversation back into the realm of normalcy for long enough that Kate and I felt like we could leave on an up note.

Many people get sexually charged up when drinking, so we did not think too much of it, but it was somewhat odd. This is our yoga teacher, after all. We had a few laughs about it and didn't think about it again until last weekend when we over for dinner. It was a great dinner too, as Adam can really cook. We had been over a few times since the night of the hot tub pitch and all were without incident. Liz would often drink a little too much and make sex jokes, but nothing too extreme and no invites to shed clothing. This night was different however and once the kid was whisked away with an almost practiced efficiency, it started. I could tell that Liz was really trying to get Kate to join forces and

encourage some kind of group activities. We weren't sure where to go with her innuendo but we were certain that we were not interested in hot tubs or partner swapping. This time around, we were a little more firm in our resistance. I am not too sure where we go from here. I mean, we like this couple a lot... despite their sheep like liberalism and desire to bed down with one or both of us. Hey, I'd do me too. However, it isn't like we can say "listen guys, we just aren't interested" because they never outright asked us. Our best hope at this point I suppose is to just keep ignoring the advances and hope they go away.

We don't want to lose these otherwise good friends or make yoga class awkward.

Matt Fitzwater-Stevens, 2/7/2014

A female friend of mine, of a "certain age" (i.e. mine), has noticed that she's been losing a lot of hair this winter. "Every time I look in the mirror," she says, "my hairline makes me think of Christopher Guest in 'The Princess Bride.' I'm afraid this will affect my self-image in strange ways." She's considering wigs.

Although men's tonsorial standards are woefully lower than those which are set for women, I'll share my own reasoning on this. The phenomenon of Bob Barker's hair convinced me, many years ago, that I would go grey and bald if that's what my genes had in store for me. Barker stubbornly maintained brown hair dye for decades after it was plausible, because he was locked in. To ditch the dye was to admit that he'd been faking it. Eventually, his career lasted so long that he was compelled to walk on stage one day with gleaming white hair--and got a standing ovation. Lesson: Hair dye, toupees, wigs etc. are all dodges that I'd have to drop embarrassingly anyway--so why start? So far, I've saved a bundle on Just for Men.

And "The Princess Bride" remains one of my favorite movies.

Judith Lloyd, 2/9/2014

If there really can be an end to it, she thought, and turned away. It was over. As much as there could be an end to anything, there was surely an end to this.

Whatever it was, it was gone, she realized, she couldn't return to the scene. Maybe she'd unknowingly surrendered her secret name. Or her identity, the person she believed herself to be. Maybe it was something related to her perception, the point at which objects registered in her peripheral vision, a different dye staining the emulsion of memory. Maybe it was something even less tangible, something that couldn't be named. Dropped microbes, flakes of skin, the distinct signature of her exhale. A strand of hair

on the door jamb, an eyelash in the bathroom sink. Just as she had taken the space in, she had left herself in it; that subtle exchange, invisible to the eye, yet made with every place we enter and exit as an aspect of our passage. Of course, she knew that she had left parts of her self. No thing of real consequence. Nothing that mattered, materially, to her small story. Someone with known motive. She'd forgotten the sorts of things you forget during a visit: a hair pin, for example, for someone with much darker hair; an aquamarine pendant on a gold chain that held no other significance than that it had been photographed around the neck of someone he'd been seen with frequently, someone people connected to him. She wasn't sure what it could be. There was something missing.

She looked back at the house. She glanced down the street. She walked out and eased it back closed, feeling the cold metal through her latex gloves. The door swung easily, at an angle, not quite hung quite right. It fell with a clank that jerked her shoulders. She moved quickly up the garden path, swinging loose the back gate latch. She had a day, maybe two, to get back east. Outside, she could smell dawn in the air. She left through the utility room, which emptied into the back lot, which was up against an alleyway. Married with horror. The thought wasn't without satisfaction, though a strange satisfaction. Not that he'll never know the difference, she realized, not like this, not any more, and threw the quilt from the front room over his empty, staring eyes.

Sara Stewart-- 2/9/2014

I had a baby put into my arms a bunch of times today. Which doesn't happen all that much – my nephew is seven and I'm not the kind of person who rushes up to a co-worker to coo over an infant that's brought into the office to be shown around. As it happened, today I ended up standing two feet behind a soccer goal holding a sleeping baby while cheering on my goalie boyfriend and the baby's mother, who was out playing in the field on the opposite team, and hoping to god a ball didn't sail over his head and hit me and/or the baby. It was a weird hour. Terrifying, mostly. But also there is something that happens to you when you're holding a baby that smells good and it falls asleep in your arms – it is an indisputably good feeling, especially when you feel, as I generally do, that babies can see into your soul and that if someone hands you one and it bursts into tears that it must be some grand comment on your shortcomings as a human being, maybe imperceptible to the adult human but absolutely evident to babies who have no filters. I also felt, as I very rarely do, that I was really living up to the expectations (stereotypical though they are) of my gender by being Good With Kids. Fortunately, someone handed me a beer shortly thereafter and then I was holding both a baby and a beer, which seemed like a good balance to me. And then he went back to his mother and I went home with Todd and we had gin and tonics and laughed at the

absurdity of TV news and made fish tacos and the whole incredibly grown-up idea of babies was shelved. But what if?

Anita Fitzwater-Stevens, 2/11/2014

Last year, I started writing my own blog on the books I read. I've been a reader since I was four and, frankly, telling other people what to read is huge fun for me. Writing publicly about this passion has given me the excuse to broaden what I read, even to make reading a high daily priority. As indulgences go, I figure this one is positive and has great intellectual value.

Unfortunately, it means that I'm not getting out for exercise as much as I'd like. When I had my gym membership, I could read while on the treadmill. Weather permitting, I can even read while walking around the neighborhood. Snow has put the kibosh on that, though.

What's an intellectual who wants to get fit to do?

As challenges go, I suppose it's not up there with ending poverty. But, if I could just solve it, I'd probably feel a lot better about the time spent on both reading and writing about it.

Alexander Koch, 2/10/2014

Chemotherapy went well. It gives me energy. My oncologist has told me it may not always do so.

Eventually I'm going to get worse. But that 'worse' will still be better than last fall when I was coughing and sick and arthritic, when I was really quite unwell. Anyhow, that is hopefully all behind me.

Of late I have had composure, felt well, and been drinking a lot of tea; my normal renitent nature has given in to the doctors and their orders. I find selecting and enjoying a fine tea to be quite the experience. The redolence of many teas is also quite a pleasure.

An Assam one day, a Pu-erh the next... it is quite the game.

There is a tea house in the city with a plethora of varieties available. The atmosphere is honest, the lighting poor. But despite the lighting and its impediment to my ineluctable desire to be surrounded by books at every possible moment, I am becoming a bit of a habitué at this establishment. A few days each week I have found myself eager to leave home, eager make my way to tea before they open at ten in the morning. This is where I

re-learn patience, as I wait from waking at five or six a.m. until the tea shop in the city opens. Then I sit, enjoying the lighting in my dim corner, and sip my selection from small tea cups, hot water available for additional steeping, and a book or three in front of me. Sometimes I write poetry. Sometimes I scribble indolently on the page.

What good does it do to write?

When no one reads the words

And you keep them hidden

All of human knowledge loses

The whole course of human history could change!

Or, perhaps nothing at all

Would happen

If someone read your writing

Or, perhaps clouds would roll out thunder

And lightning brighten the sky

My writing, on the other hand,

I keep hidden away

Like a prized shell

Found as a child,

Or the mouse skull I once had

Protected

Never allowing others near

For they might damage it

Judith Lloyd, 2/12/2014

We emptied all the kitchen cabinets and piled up the dishes, bowls, cups and mugs--so many mugs--on the dining room table. We put dry goods in boxes, spice jars, anything we didn't want touched by tomorrow's preventative exterminator pass. The result could be an estate sale, or the bargain table at an antique mall. How strange it feels, seeing your belongings entirely out of context, shoved in close to prioritize space over function. On the breakfast bar, Ben set aside some of the things we use most: two plates, two glasses, two mugs; measuring spoons and measuring cups, flatware, the small strainer. It flashed me on the week I spent in radioactive quarantine, last winter, as an aspect of my cancer treatment. The separated set of utensils, silhouetted against the frail February sunset on the breakfast bar. The paper lanterns in front of the city in the window at twilight. How strange it is, the ways in which we make our homes; even stranger, the ways we identify them.

Baxter Tocher, 2/14/2014

I arrived at the hotel in good time, checked in, found my room, had a swift look around, and started to unpack the suitcase. It had been a long, tiring trip, and I felt shabby.

I'd arranged to meet with Jimi and the rest of the band at 3pm. Plenty time for a few hours rest to nudge the energy levels back up.

Except: socks. There was only one pair in the suitcase, and the only others I had were those I was wearing. There was no way that these would keep me going for than a few days. I frantically rummaged around the pockets inside the suitcase. Nothing. Wait - one sock. A lone one. Dark brown.

I asked the girl at the reception desk where I could buy socks. "Hmm. I'm pretty sure you won't be able to buy them anywhere".

I headed off into the shopping mall next door. Most of the retailers seemed to be selling suits for businessmen. I walked into what looked like a newsagents. A magazine, shrink-wrapped in a bag, carried a photo of The Moody Blues' Justin Hayward, with the headline I Should Never Have Let [name redacted] Into The Moodies. Close by were towers of slipcased versions of two parts of the UK Government's Internet Strategy. I sneered. There seemed to be more cardboard dividers in the slipcases than printed content. No socks anywhere.

There was a large outdoor market nearby, stalls under white tents. I stopped at one of the wooden tables to buy a pack of cigarettes. The vendor sold only two things: little

boxed candles and cigarettes. I could sense people around the other stalls watching me, glaring. "Fucking hippy", they were thinking. Their hatred was almost transparent. I shrugged.

I managed to get back to the hotel just as Bill Clinton walked in, cool as ever. I stormed along the corridor. "Clinton incoming! CLINTON INCOMING!", I yelled. I could hear folk scrabbling around in a couple of the rooms off to the side, but couldn't see anyone.

Clinton's long coat was fabulous: soft light blue denim, six-inch Union Jack flags around it at jaunty angles. It matched his white hair splendidly. As we shook hands, he glanced around nervously, suddenly taking command. "Someone's been tampering with the wedding flowers", he said. "Someone's trying to sabotage the gig." I felt like I should have been watching the flowers, as if it were all somehow my fault. The self-imposed guilt was unnerving.

Jimi was relaxed about when we should rehearse. I hung around. One of the bands showed me the private collection of notebooks that Jimi had written. They lived in their own custom made heavy-duty cardboard box. One about The Experience, another about Billy Cox, a book of poetry printed on gorgeous dark purple paper. How had I not heard about these? I felt like such a jerk.

A small crowd had begun to gather outside, waiting for things to begin. Jimi grinned that wide, infectious grin I'd seen so many times before. "Uh, forget the socks, man. They're not important. Let's just hit the stage and play, baby." I followed him up the steps.

Thomas Park, 2/14/2014

It's the "Valentine's Day" holiday-- my second to spend with my fiancée. I feel relieved not to have to look for someone, especially with the characteristic urgency of a holiday like today. Valentine's Day polarizes people. If you have a significant other, your appreciation of them is heightened. If not, you are reminded of what (or whom) you lack.

I am thankful that, during the large part of my first forty years, I found distractions. Making music, video and other art served to pass the alone time. Reading was a major pastime for many years. Finding a good writer and following their work provided serious entertainment.

Some pastimes are more passive, and others more active. Lately I have enjoyed some of the more active ones. I don't enjoy watching the television (or even movies) any more.

When I find a good show or movie, at best it points the way towards things I feel that I

should try myself.

It's hard to justify simple consumption when a person can create.

Scott Turner, 2/14/2014

Preparedness.

Last weekend we were in the middle of the biggest storms so far this year. Northern California has been without any real rain for a long time. Last winter was light and as a result the water levels have been at a record low for nearly a year. Lakes that house boats were sandy plots of land and there were numerous places where one could simply walk across the Russian River so, we wanted the rain. Badly. We got what we wanted and over 12 inches of rain fell in one weekend. Many folks find this a good reason to stay home and hunker down. I can certainly appreciate this. We however had plans. We were going to pick up a new wine rack that we desperately needed. It lived in the town of Sonoma, about an hour away. Because of the size of the rack we needed to take Kate's RAV4 instead of my Jeep. Kate's car is... well, it serves as a storage locker and a closet which means that any time we need to fold down the seats a major cleaning has to happen. Laundry baskets, cat litter, cases of bubbly water, jackets, and coats go from the back of her car into the house. Once we have completed this task we are on our way. Fueled up and ready to rock our day. A quick afternoon jaunt to the wine supply shop and a bit of wine tasting in the stormy weather is exactly what we need.

While I have immense respect for weather I am never too worried about it. Kate and I have both lived in states that have snow and freezing weather in addition to heavy rains. In fact she has lived in states that get tornados so we are pretty set. Besides, I have created emergency kits for both vehicles, so even if we were to get stranded, we have blankets, water, flashlights, and food. No problem, right? Well, just one. The kit was one of the items she removed. I did not realize this until I was watching the water in the creek next to us rise up to level of the street. The irony of being prepared for an emergency situation every single day except the one where we would be the most likely need to be was not lost on me.

Fortunately we managed to get there and back without incident. We got our wine rack and also picked up some great wine, olive oil, and vinegar from the wineries we visited. We also learned a valuable lesson. Fortunately we did not have to learn the hard way.

Judith Lloyd, 2/14/2014

It could be like this or it could be something else. Something not like this, not like it at

all. Something that reminds you at first of something else: because that's the thing about new experiences: we move through them backward, at first. Start with the most familiar components, the things we believe we've processed in ordinary time. See if we can fit the components of this new, unprecedented thing into the packaging of something we've already dealt with.

I can deal with this, you might think, because I've already dealt with something else entirely. Something nothing like this. Of those endless formations human experience is capable of offering this one is entirely foreign to you: and yet, we go forward, we plunge in, because we think we understand it, because we heard about it once, because once, some years gone, for a slight majority of one full minute, we imagined what it would be like for an individual confronted with an issue of this nature. What else would we be, if not an expert? A king of my domain?

Matt Fitzwater-Stevens, 2/14/2014

Mike Rowe, and a sizeable chunk of the American media, just got rolled.

You might have noticed the brawl ignited by a commercial done for Walmart by pitchman and "Dirty Jobs" alumnus Mike Rowe, in which he trumpeted the company's pledge to spend \$250 billion on U.S.-made products over the next ten years. He has spent the last couple of days at the focus of a media whirlwind, in which he's being accused of whoring out his very hard-won reputation for being a kind of bard for working-class America. He is trying to change the focus to a meta-story: he's being attacked for the sake of an ideological sound bite, while he and Walmart are unrecognized for the real good that they're doing.

Unfortunately for both of them, it takes exactly three minutes of research and very simple math to show that Walmart's pledge is a nullity.

Walmart is relying on people being dazzled by a big number: \$250 billion. It's hoping that we'll miss the "over ten years" part, and assuming that we won't Google their financials.

Walmart's \$250-billion-over-a-decade American purchase pledge averages to \$25 billion per year. Meanwhile, during its 2013 fiscal year, Walmart had \$352 billion in costs chargeable to inventory. \$25 billion works out to a mere 7% of this figure.

Stated inversely, Walmart just pledged to purchase 93% of its goods from foreign manufacturers. That's the story.

Alexander Koch, 2/15/2014

"Even naturalists are uninterested in the pigeons..." wrote Baron Wormser in his poem Pigeons. And it is true. Today I counted two flocks of Turkeys, one with seven birds and one with eight. I counted a flock of common redpolls, a black-capped chickadee (the official bird of the state of Maine), crows perched in the remnants of old oak, gulls diving into the sea to feed, ducks at the snow-covered beach. But the one species of bird I saw today that I ignored were the pigeons in Portland. I was in the city at the beginning of the day, around ten o' clock. I am quite sure, as I always do, that I saw pigeons whilst there. The problem is, I do not remember them. They were uninteresting. I didn't think to pay attention; I was indifferent, as they were to me. I spent the day in rapt attention to the snow covered trees: the spruce, the eastern white pine, the beech, and oak, the maple, and fir. After tea I spent the day exploring. Traveling about in semi-random style, experiencing the winter wonderlands (or, as some might say, wastelands) of the Maine countryside. Even on the roadsides each inch of the forest is unique.

Now, as for those pigeons they are quite closely related to the mourning dove, of which I counted 5 this day while I traipsed across the county (and partly into the next county, besides). The other night I heard a great-horned owl that held my consideration for nigh on an hour. The pigeons, frigidly cooing in the muck strewn snow of the city, I ignored completely. I heard neither hide nor hair of them as I slushed my way to get a fine Assam tea to keep me warm on my exploration. Ah, well, at least I saw a pine grosbeak today. Perhaps, the next time I am in the city, I must pay more attention to my surroundings. I ought to focus on these things, whether it is in the vastness of the countryside and forests, or in the confines of the city muck.

Nathan Carter, 2/15/2014

Beyond Sensory Experience: Faint

Beyond Sensory Experience has morphed considerably throughout their career, transforming from what was basically an intellectual extension of post-MZ.412 auditory aesthetics (understandable, given that Drakh, one-half of the BSE duo, was previously in MZ.412, in addition to frequently collaborating with underground industrial legend Nordvargr) to a compelling, and frequently emotionally moving, dark ambient experience, often featuring acoustic instrumentation over the previous trends of harsh industrial synths and field recordings. Thus, after the surprisingly hopeful and enigmatically positive sounds of "Modern Day Diabolists", BSE retreats towards vaguely familiar territory in "Faint", described by the duo during the lead up to release as "music for exhausted souls".

As has been the case for BSE's last few releases, this album consists mainly of subdued synth elements, piano, guitar, percussion (presumably both live and sequenced), and field recordings (both spoken and otherwise), frequently floating atop varying levels of reverb. The oceanic reference are especially appropriate here, given that the album sleeve and booklet consists of pictures of the sea, waves, and the ocean, representing each one of the eleven tracks. Thematically (and nearly all of BSE's albums have been based on concepts regarding human phenomena) the album deals with regret, hesitation, retrospection, and ambivalence. With track titles such as "Bystanders", "Respect", "Sleepwalking", and "Exhausted", among others, BSE presents a picture to the listener that is neither completely optimistic nor totally hopeless, but instead is a more nuanced examination of subtle emotions.

While all of the tracks are relatively good, some notable choice cuts include "Respect", with a echoing piano refrain and a sample of a man stating "I simply respect chemistry...Chemistry must be respected" (which lends a fascinating sense of intrigue given the lack of context) and "Sleepwalking", a shimmering guitar composition featuring stretched out guitar over sounds of bird chirping and someone stating "Recently I have come to like sounds that don't change...things that I used to try to ignore" (which could be a comment regarding drone/ambient music or simply a notice of greater perceptive capabilities). It is also important to point out that, on this (and nearly all their other albums), they feature not only samples in English, but also in Japanese, Czech, Swedish, and a few other dialects, meaning that what one takes away from the songs might also depend on how one is linguistically inclined...

Judith Lloyd, 2/15/2014

Molten wax at the flame's base.

It seems I'm always writing about burning.

We have lips and hands and feet and hearts. We have names and selves. Unrelated concepts conjoined for the needs of the other. Old and young, we forget there is always something we don't know about. Something we've forgotten. Something we remember that has been lost to everyone else.

So much of what you remember is only remembered by you.

I can call up the texture of a page, the weight, the heaviness of the line. I can remember if the letters were steady, rhythm building to something, sure of where they were going: or if they seemed puzzled, half-formed, bent and groundless, straying ever from the line.

The thing about uncertainty is that you never know.

*

There are times when I need the intensity. Life can't just be about living, can it? Become sufficient in acquiring food and adequate shelter. Find a mate and reproduce. Provide for your reproductions. Teach your reproductions to become sufficient in acquiring food and adequate shelter. Maybe everything we do in life is an over-complicated translation of those basic initiatives? If so, if we are just glorified repeating life cycles eating up the planet with our excess, why can't we scale back? Our bodies weren't designed to live the way we want to live. Our veins become thick and brittle; our hearts can't take the pressure. We forget ourselves. We remember too much. Cars and houses and food, it isn't enough. We need meaning, don't we? Not even meaning, because maybe our only meaning is the survival and propagation of the species. We need more. We need satisfaction. We need happiness. We need mystery: we need the possibility of more. Maybe we can never learn the exact nature of what that more could be? Maybe we need something we can't ever know.

It seems I'm always writing about burning.

And so religion. And so art. And so excess, our lovely peripheries, our too much that isn't enough. There is too much emptiness in our hearts. There is too much silence to roar back at us in the wake of any sound. That's the way of it, isn't it? For me, it is. So long in silence, so long with just enough to keep me alive, any little nothing becomes a feast. No one gets it. No one understands. No one could, I've done too much work to make myself incomprehensible. Reprehensible. In need of reprimand. For what? For letting my mind wander? For thinking in directions I'd try to think myself away from? From going astray, becoming a stray? It's struck me that people who need to write a lot aren't typically very happy people.

But, then, neither are people who don't. Neither are people, really. You think a wedding, a house, a place where you are valued in society might be enough. A baby, you think, two babies. An MFA, a doctorate, a bigger house, a better job, publication, maybe, tattoos, perhaps. An automobile with seat warmers, a hot tub in the yard, iPhones or kitchen widgets or money in the bank. You have friends that call out to you from across the street in every city you frequent, it isn't enough. You can drop enough names to choke a clotheshorse, it isn't enough. You have wine and cheese parties, writers groups, a gang of lifelong friends to meet up with once a week at your favorite pub, it isn't enough. You have people who admire you, who say you are beautiful when you aren't even trying, it isn't enough. You've had more lovers that would take you back in a heartbeat than not, you have people from your past who think about you more than you think about them. You are in your thirties and thin, with a quick mind, with potential for more, more you will surely achieve. It isn't enough. Dissatisfaction overwhelms you. You can't let go of the past. You can't stop fearing the future. You will never amount to anything in this

state, but what's there to amount to?

Bag of bones. Teeth and skin. Excretions and intrusions. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. Except: none of it is my fault. Except: I was the one who got hurt.

It seems I'm always apologizing for getting hurt.

Adri Holt, 2/16/2014

Since Tuesday, Ben and I have been in New York. It's my first time being in this state and Ben's 2nd, although the last time he visited was 18 years ago. So far I'm completely sure on how to feel about this state. Although we haven't really run into any trouble, except for going wrong at least once a day. We haven't been mugged or treated horribly, we actually have met quite a few nice people. On Valentine's Day we met a couple waiting for an all you can eat sushi restaurant too and we ended up eating with them (after waiting for like over an hour) then going to their house and chilling until 8 in the morning.

Most people in this state either walk, take the subway or the bus, or all three. But the subway is an awful, awful thing. Ok, not so awful, but it is pretty different from the ways of transportation of Saint Louis or Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Honestly though, I cannot wait to be back home and driving my own car to go places. When we were on our way to the sushi restaurant we took a bus. The odd thing about it is that we had to stand in line. Standing in line made me feel like I was back in grade school. Ben and I were confused about it in general until a woman who was already in line told us that we had to stand in line, which was really nice of her. So people in New York aren't as bad as their reputation has led me to believe. Still you should always be alert (that was the advice given to me on multiple occasions).

If you ever visit the Empire State Building in the winder time and go out to the outside observatory deck on the 86th floor...DRESS WARMLY! It's really windy and cold because of the altitude that you're at. It's a good thing they have fences around it or you'd blow right off about 1200 or so feet down to your death. The 102nd is inside and warm, you can see a better view of the city from up there, even if it's just a bit higher (1250 feet).

We've been to quite a few places here in New York and our trip isn't even done! Tomorrow we'll be leaving for intercourse, Pennsylvania (has the word intercourse in it) & Ronks, Pennsylvania (Amish town). Overall New York has been an interesting experience that I'd probably like to do again.

Sara Stewart, 2/16/2014

So I work for this newspaper, where they are in the process of trying to reinvent themselves as one of the cool kids – aka, “web first” – and the process has evoked a lot of grumbling from longtime writers like me.

Of course, everything evokes grumbling from reporters. That is what we do best. But there have been many uncomfortable changes, like painful start times (“come in bright and early prepared to write web copy for the day!”) and dumbed-down stories (and this is at a publication where I have more than once been told, in past years, that my pitches are “too think-y”). So I sit at my desk, trying to come up with more television actors who’ve had obvious plastic surgery, and to hurriedly assemble the list and some tossed-off lines of copy so it can Go Live as soon as possible, and then I can tweet about it, and hope someone retweets my tweet, and I’m thinking the whole process now feels, more than anything, like our new version of factory work.

I don’t mean to belittle the lives of actual factory workers; I’m not going to die in a fire like at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. I get bathroom breaks whenever I want. But still: this is our product: titillating headlines and brainless entertainment coverage. And we must make as much of it as possible, as fast as possible. And then go home, come back in tomorrow and do it all again. People consume it in a minute or two and then want more. An endless appetite for distraction.

I have these thoughts about wanting off the content-generation treadmill. I feel I must not be the only one. How to lead a revolt among the Twitter chain gang? What if we all collectively agreed to stop clicking on stories that insult our intelligence? What if we gave ourselves a break and didn’t tweet snarky one-liners all day, every day? What if we had National Only Reading a Book Day? What if we gave the finger to anything online involving the word “slideshow”?

I’d ask further, but I have to get back to writing Top Ten Haircuts of the Stars.

Sara Stewart, 2/16/2014

What am I doing wrong? Or, five things most adults seem to have mastered that still elude me:

1) Getting frequent flyer miles

Friends always seem to be jetting off to various locales, brushing it off with a casual “I had miles,” the implication being that it was a free trip. I never feel more remedial than when I’m wondering how someone managed to rack up enough points to “have miles.” And I fly places! Sometimes! But since I pick the cheapest flight I can find on Kayak, it’s

not usually on the same airline. How is everyone not doing it this way?

2) Putting on eyeliner

Most women Of a Certain Age (i.e. mine, 41) tend to be wearing eyeliner when out and about. Every so often I decide I need to join their ranks, and sequester myself in the bathroom with a new Sephora purchase and a resolution to look like a put-together woman from here on out. I usually emerge 20 minutes later, pissed off and with red eyes from having had to wash off the embarrassing attempt at drawing a line over my eye. I don't get it. I just... don't get it.

3) Picking which side of the fitted sheet goes where

You'd think you would get this right once in a while, just via the law of averages. I am 100% never right when decoding which elasticized side is the long and which is the short.

4) Remembering the rules of sports

Football is the one with the yards. Baseball is the one with the bases. Basketball involves free throws and you get more points the farther away you are. Anything more than that, there isn't room for in my brain. It isn't that the space is taken up by anything useful, like math. I think movies of the 80s are taking up a disproportionate amount of real estate. But you know what? I'd rather remember Heathers verbatim than understand why that dude is kicking a field goal.

5) Appreciating Bruce Springsteen

He's just singing the same line. Over and over and over. I think I must hear Springsteen the way the kids in the Peanuts specials hear grownups.

Judith Lloyd, 2/16/2014

You could be any number of individuals with whom I could enact any number of relationships.

You could be dark and brooding, like fair trade 85% cocoa sharp on the tongue; or you could be pessimistic and self-absorbed, like thin smears of a chocolate-esque substance on plastic packaging.

I could be self-absorbed, and I often am: you don't seem to be able to attain peak levels of self-awareness without a few good stints of self-absorption in the mix. Anyway, it's fun to be self-absorbed. As a pass-time it is highly underrated, or perhaps what I mean is "inappropriately demonized." The lot of us, it would seem, would rather be caught up

in materialism and competition; who can craft the most impressive version of themselves, who can have it all: the most babies, the most beautiful babies, the healthiest diet, the most aesthetically appealing food, the most demanding workout routine; who has the most people counting on them, the most admirers, the strongest marriage--don't forget! About the sex! The best sex! Sex so good you can't even imagine how good it is, that's how good it is!

Should it become apparent that we have no hope of winning in that race, some of us will put ourselves in to the opposing category, wherein there can be no comparison to the tragedy we've been dealt: So just shut up about your beautiful babies and your impressive jobs! I am in too much pain to hear about it!

Of course, we're also quite capable of, just after making gold in the misery Olympics, slapping a negativity citation onto someone dealing with something as-bad if not worse. Suck it up, we'll say, Get off it, we'll say, You're making me doubt that I am the center of the universe.

Frankly, I'd rather be self-absorbed.

Anita Fitzwater-Stevens, 2/19/2014

A young girl was kidnapped and killed south of this area in the last two days. It's heartbreaking. And, I'm certain the details are even more heartbreaking.

In this world of Facebook news sourcing and communication, I've seen multiple wishes for torture, pain and suffering for the man arrested for the crime. I get it. I have so many children in my life that I would do anything in my power for. Anything to prevent their experiencing pain or sorrow or being hurt in any way remotely close to this.

But I can't support such vengeful thoughts as I see spreading like a wave over the state. Hearing news like this and seeing the responses to it leads me back in thought to my Christian upbringing, an upbringing I have left far behind me in the vast majority of my life.

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord." Vengeance is not the purview of humans. The purview of the gods, perhaps, but not that of humans.

Being human is part of what causes such tragedies as this. Being human is the very essence of fragility, both mental and physical, that leads someone to commit such atrocities. It's natural that it would also make us want vengeance. But, recognition of all the things being human means should also mean that we recognize where it shouldn't lead us. That way lynch mobs lie.

That way recurrent waves of violence and hatred lie.

We can choose, as humans, to continue to see the humanity even in the worst actions our fellow men undertake. We can reach beyond our own fragile minds and hearts to something better. And, in doing so, we can help move the world further from the place where things like this can happen.

That's what I hope for anyway. That and peace for the family of this girl.

Scott Turner, 2/20/2014

One Piece Of Advice

If you were asked to talk to a roomful of young women as they get ready to head out into the world and share with them one piece of advice what would it be? If there was one message you could send out to all young women in America what would you say? For me it would simply be "grow some pubes". Honestly. I think it is the best advice a young lady could ask for. I am not asking girls to go back into the dark ages of pre 1980's jungle bush or anything, but what is with this obsession of shaving everything off? How absolutely boring. Where is your personality? Where is your sense of style? Your flair? It's not down there, that is for sure. Okay, I admit that it's nice to change things up, it is nice to experiment and get ones kink on, but seriously, why do so many young women feel the need to be a Baldy McGhee?

How about a nice trim? Something sculpted to work with your swimwear or underwear? Could be short like the back of a Marine's head or a bit longer. You could go with a landing strip, the traditional triangle, the heart, the princess, or even the Chaplin. Just something. Even Sasha Grey was trying to bring the pubes back when she was winding down her adult film career.

Are you trying to cover up the fact that you are not a real blonde? It is okay, we already know and we don't really care.

I wonder if we have hit a point yet where there is a generation of women out there who have never even seen their own bush. A generation who started shaving everything as soon as they started shaving their legs. It is a shame really. I blame porn and the slew of bald celebrity upskirt shots we have been forced to endure. Can we still even call it a beaver? I am assuming that this choice bit of slang came into being as a result of "fur" and not a flat tail or tree gnawing teeth.

They say what is old is new and that styles come and go. I certainly hope this boring trend starts to reverse itself before I get too old to care.

Jill Miller, 2/20/2014

He cracks a joke about chemotherapy, and mumbles something else. In the blissful blur attending sleep, I don't hear the second part, and off and on the next day, I'll wonder if he might have been revealing a detail about prognosis, test results, treatment plans. As always, I'll ask about it, once, less expecting an answer than to signal he should share if he wants to. Meanwhile, I consider the room temperature—warm enough to prevent him from shivering, I decide—and pull up the thick down comforter. I'm not used to the thinness through his shoulders and arms. Things are changing, more than he lets on, but I'm more aware of what's exactly the same: the deep contentment of being mutually in the moment, the hold-tight-to-right-nowness of us. It wasn't prompted by a brush with mortality; it's not a side-effect of chemo. If such a thing remains forever undiagnosable, that's fine with me.

Judith Lloyd, 2/20/2014

WHAT I WOULD WRITE ABOUT IF I DIDN'T HAVE TO WRITE ABOUT PROBLEMATIC RELATIONSHIPS

Christmas decorations and anonymous artistry. The speckled interiors of antique mirrors. How our apartment counter tops are the same woodblock pattern as my kitchen table growing up. How the spacial relationships within my apartment change at random when I close my eyes and let myself forget about the spacial relationships within my apartment. How I could be so desperate and passionate when I was young; how that passionate desperation felt so relentlessly authentic at the time, but now seems just kind of embarrassing. How I found a moonstone I'd lost for eleven years among my grandmother's things when we were cleaning out her house after she died. How my grandmother's house no longer exists. How so many sacred spaces from my history no longer exist. The evolution of private spaces over the course of my life. Notebooks and notebooks. The spacial relationships of notebooks. The sacred spaces of notebooks. Highways at night. Rounding the corner to drive alongside the Chicago loop at night on our way to visit my parents this December, how it was so incredibly saturated with carefully defined electric light, glass, and steel; how it felt like turning a piece of articulated pyrite in a jeweler's lamp, how I wanted to put Chicago in my mouth. Why I'm always comparing roads and cities to minerals. Why I always want to put sparkly things in my mouth. Why I stopped thinking about ghosts. Why my spirituality has been so fraught with distraction and false starts. How I still end up being one of the most spiritually grounded people I know. How to make a living. How to have a life. How to make a living and have a life in spite of having cancer. How to make a living and have a

life because of having cancer. Why I prefer dusty, irrational spaces filled with impractical things. The weird emotional sway of metaphysical book catalogs from 1993. What I feel when I sit with my niece. Paper lanterns, sculpted teak wood screens. Needing to allow myself a few opportunities to really lose it. Wrap myself in a prayer shawl. Scream and scream and scream. Who the Goddess is for me, now. Why I only let myself write in black ink. What I would write in red ink, in purple. Radiohead in Fishkill. Forest preserves, with and without Ben. Being stoned. Sensory deprivation. Spinning. How altered states can be not even considered by some; how altered states can be openly condemned by some; how altered states are necessary to the basic functioning of others. Stairways. The ghosts of stairways. Empty stairways. Bridges that aren't being crossed. Gifts I have assimilated into my daily life. Things I have forgotten. Why I have forgotten the things I have forgotten. What to write about when you can no longer write about unrequited love: there has to be something?

Adri Holt, 2/22/2014

The common sayings surrounding the word 'home' usually go "home is where the heart is" or "home is where you hang your hat". After a two week vacation, anyone would probably be dying (not literally, hopefully) to go home. For about a year or so, my home has been wherever my husband is. But since we added two new additions (our kittens, sparrow and harkness), my home has become our apartment in cape where both my kittens and husband are.

Since these two cuties couldn't come along with us on our trip to the northeast, we had to leave them at home with my husband's brother who was watching them for us. Our kittens are pretty much our children because we don't plan on having any of our own. So I missed my babies a great deal and even though I was having an enjoyable time traveling, I still missed home. I missed the place where I could snuggle and relax. I counted the days until I could be back in my own bed and using my own shower and not have to worry about dirtying the places we stayed at. I'm not a very good housekeeper...

So after we got back to the airport in Saint Louis, as much as I didn't love the thought of traveling more, cape is still about a 2 hour drive. We had dinner with his brother and mother and the whole time I was on the edge of my seat just itching to get back home, to get back to my babies, and to get back the place that I feel most comfortable. 'Cause home shouldn't be a place that you loathe to be at, it should be somewhere where you just feel like you can let go and just be your weird self with your husband and kittens.

I know not everyone actually has a home like this or even a home at all. Somebody's home could also be a bookstore or at a rave or somewhere that they can just be themselves and not have to worry about what other people think or the worries of

normal day to day life. I honestly hope that everyone can have this kind of place to go to so that they don't have to constantly be on edge that they cannot be themselves. A place they can call home.

Baxter Tocher, 2/23/2014

Scotland is complicated.

We're part of Great Britain, and part of the United Kingdom. So it's a country within a country. We're served by two parliaments, and consequently we live under two sets of laws. Our banks are able to print their own banknotes, but we also use English notes.

A country within a country? Great Britain (sometimes just called "Britain") is comprised of three countries: Scotland, England and Wales. The membership of the United Kingdom is these three, plus Northern Ireland (but not Ireland, which is a separate country altogether). Oh, and we hate being called English - we're not.

So, what about money? Well, the Bank of England is the UK's central bank, and it issues banknotes. These bank notes are seen reasonably often in Scotland, but they're not legal tender here, though I've never known any person or business to refuse to accept one. Scotland's big commercial banks, the Bank of Scotland, the Royal Bank of Scotland, and the Clydesdale Bank, all issue their own banknotes. These are seen and used every day in Scotland, but none of them are legal tender anywhere in the UK (including Scotland!).

I've had experiences in England where shops and bars have refused to take Scottish banknotes. One time, I was told to take them to a local Bureau de Change and exchange them for English notes. The cashier said I'd need to pay 8% commission on the exchange. Madness! I politely declined (we're not a foreign country) and withdrew more cash from an ATM, certain that I'd get only English notes there. Oddly, folks in Northern Ireland accept Scottish banknotes without question, and I've seen a few here issued by the commercial banks in Northern Ireland. Coins? Well, they're easy. They're all produced by the Royal Mint in England, and used everywhere. There are no locally issued coins.

Politics, then? A referendum in 1997 led to the creation of the Scottish Parliament. Westminster (the UK Parliament, in London, informally named after its location) agreed to devolve certain powers to Holyrood (the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, again named after its location), while other powers were "reserved" to Westminster. Devolved powers were any not specifically listed in legislation as being reserved to Westminster. So Scotland is able to legislate on agriculture, education, the environment, health, justice and local government issues. It is specifically excluded from legislating on constitutional matters, international issues, currency, postal services, energy, medicine,

and several other areas.

The two different parliaments have, since the introduction of devolution, been run by politicians of different persuasions. The current UK government is a coalition, mainly right-wing Conservatives with a few Liberal Democrats. The Scottish Parliament is currently led by the centre-left Scottish National Party. The issue of whether Scotland should become an independent country is a subject of momentous debate at the moment; a referendum is scheduled for 18 September 2014 to give the people who live in Scotland the opportunity to decide whether or not Scotland will become an independent country.

Scotland is complicated...

Nathan Carter, 2/24/2014

Dark City Analysis Fragment

Lately I've been thinking about Dark City. Before the Matrix, there was Dark City: a darkly stylish neo-noir thriller about an amnesiac who awakens in a strange hotel, only to find he is pursued by a group of mysterious pale-faced individuals known as "The Strangers". As he goes about clearing his name from a series of murder charges, he quickly realizes that not only is his memory and identity in question, but also the nature of their city as well. In a town where the sun never shines, and memory is rigorously ambiguous, certain people are awakening from their routine lives to discover the truth is far more troubling than they had realized...

The movie touches on a number of themes I personally can identify with, and also some that are becoming more relevant in this day and age. In the film, the "Strangers" are a group of extraterrestrials who are attempting, for reasons which are never entirely made clear, to discover the nature of the human soul. To do this, they manipulate the memories and experiences of the captive citizens of the city in addition to the physical structure of the city itself. When they want to observe a specific individual or trait, they may then leave that individual alone while manipulating other elements of their reality. To do this, the populace is collectively put to sleep at midnight each 'day' as the Strangers make their alterations. But, at times, people wake up during the 'imprinting', and catch a glimpse at the machinations hidden behind their reality...

Before I get into Rufus Sewell's character, I would like a moment to reflect on William Hurt's character. In one of the movie's most compelling scenes, he is required to go to the house of a former inspector (played by Colin Friels). The general knowledge is that the detective, at some point, saw something on a case which unhinged him. But, as he later reveals, he woke up during an imprinting process. While he doesn't understand the

full nature of their imprisonment (namely, that not only is the city the only thing in their world, but their 'world' is actually a space habitat located in a distant corner of space), he is tormented by the knowledge that their memories and identities are interchangeable in a city that no one can escape. Meanwhile, William Hurt's character represents the more common view that can be seen throughout the movie, in that he suspects that something might be wrong, but he cannot put his finger on it.

"Do you ever think about the past much?" Walenski (Friel's character) asks William Hurt's. "I've been trying to remember things, CLEARLY remember things, from my past, but the more I try to think back, the more it all starts to unravel. None of it seems real. It's like I've just been dreaming this life, and when I finally wake up, I'll be somebody else. Somebody totally different!" I think there is an interesting parallel between these two characters and two sorts of people in real life: those who suspect the structures of reality, but remain within its confines and those who discover the true nature of events and circumstances and are at once simultaneously frustrated with their inability to change the nature of their 'imprisonment' and petrified with fear at the possible consequences such knowledge might bring.

Anita Fitzwater-Stevens, 2/25/2014

A friend posted a video of herself singing an aria from Carmen this week. It got me thinking about opera. Well, honestly, I think about opera often. I seem to be one of the few people I know who genuinely enjoy that kind of music. It is grandiose, overwhelming, even. It sweeps people along or knocks them over as it rolls on. As music goes, it embodies passion in a way that makes a lot of people uncomfortable.

I get that. I also get that there's a language barrier, often, that keeps people from giving it a chance to win them over. And yet, there are lots of pop songs in other languages that people love and listen to without complaint. I know I'm not the only one who remembers that scourge of the 1990's, the Macarena.

So, where's the hatred come from?

I have a theory that it stems from the same mental space that hatred for country music comes from. Country music gets shunned for espousing "redneck" ideas and ways of life. We look down on it as odd, different, emblematic of a lifestyle that we don't like. Opera gets that in reverse. Thought of as elitist, pretentious, the music of the 1%. In fact, that's a widespread misconception, given that opera adapts many folk tales and old stories from its origins.

It's another example of how unwilling we are in this culture to see beauty in something unfamiliar or different from our own background. If opera were in English, would

people despise it so? The popularity of musical theater in this country leads me to think that wouldn't be the case. Is it ticket prices? I don't think so--after all, people will charge tickets to see U2 at exorbitant prices readily enough. I have to return to the theory that it's a form of reverse snobbery.

There's beauty to be found in all music forms, even if all of the performances in a category aren't to one's liking. I suggest that we all should open ourselves more to that idea. And, that we should develop a greater willingness to step outside our established comfort zones in the hope that we will learn to appreciate something new.

Matt Fitzwater-Stevens, 2/26/2014

One of the glories of the Internet is how much more easily anyone can speak to the world, without filtration by the powerful. The unfortunate corollary is how much easier it is for the powerful to speak to the world without being filtered by anybody. A February 25 al-Jazeera online piece, "Ultranationalist Neo-Nazi Parties on the March in Ukraine," is a case in point.

Without any reflection on the needs of Ukrainian Jews, this article sets off some alarm bells. To start with, al-Jazeera editorially disclaims it at the bottom. It's an opinion column, not a news item. Unfortunately, the low visibility of this disclaimer creates the erroneous impression that it's a news item backed by al-Jazeera's news division. Second, it has not one mention of Russia's own long campaign to yank Ukraine back into its orbit, which would be useful context for author John Bachelor's rumblings about Russia marching into the country and conquering it. Third, the piece is odd in the way it flinches from any passage that portrays Russia in anything but the best light. Russia is magisterial, an "adamant" protector of everyone's human rights. Finally, who are the shadowy "sources" Bachelor keeps citing? The one clue he provides is the sub-headline he throws in toward the end: "The View from Moscow," under which he simply recapitulates everything he's said above.

In other words, this article seems not to be a journalistic exercise. It is, rather, a Kremlin mouthpiece. Meanwhile, at the same time, the *Jerusalem Post* was reporting that there was no anti-Jewish agitation in Ukraine, including quotes from the country's ranking rabbi.

I can't help but be reminded of the tactics that Germany used to justify its moves on the Sudetenland and Poland. Before its invasions, Germany's state-coordinated media kept pushing stories about discrimination against German minorities in these areas. Germany also infiltrated agents provocateurs. Substitute "Russian" for "German," and

you see the same thing happening here. The ultimate irony would be if Russia used the Jewish minority in the same way...as a cover for Russian ethnic irredentism.

The Ukraine has been a giant playground for invaders. Mongols, Poles, Russians, British, French, Germans. The Soviets' anti-kulak campaign primed the Ukrainians to welcome the Nazi-era Germans, only to discover they were considered *untermenschen*. Some of the least fortunate people in history were the Eastern European peoples of World War II's USSR, who had no good choices.

The damnable part is that most people simply want to live. To grow up, have families, grow old and die, in peace and moderate comfort, is the hope of most human beings. Tribal notions of ethnicity are exploited by ambitious people who want to divide in order to control.

Author's note: As I wrote this, Russia was secretly infiltrating troops into the Crimean Peninsula. Over the next two weeks, Russia did indeed invade Ukraine, and a week later Russia announced that it would annex the Crimea.

Thomas Park, 2/27/2014

"Isolationist music" is a good way to describe my early musical efforts. I have quite a few pieces that are basically just altered sounds recorded from a shortwave radio. One reviewer called me a "hack" for works like these. I admit, they don't bear up well to active listening-- only to late-night listening while alone in bed, zoning out.

So why write music like this? At the time, I think there was something rebellious about it. JUST a low sound. Forty minutes of essentially the same drone pitch (my piece "Constant"). Years later, I find much of this music to be hard to listen to. It has a depressing quality. But it was where I was at when I wrote it, so it was genuine.

In defense of my early minimal music, it does function by limiting sensual input. Sounds are offered to the ear, but their changes are minute and almost imperceptible. It's not the musical equivalent of a big Hollywood film, with explosions and fight scenes. More like a documentary about the moon, or a nature film showing images of the desert.

I was lucky enough to find someone to be with, but I remember the "desert time" in my life. Many of us have them. Maybe we all do.

Sara Stewart, 3/2/2014

Do you think Amy of Amy's and Annie of Annie's know each other? I like to think they

grew up as best friends in Vermont somewhere – it's got to be Vermont, right? - and ran a lemonade stand together. Real lemonade, from fruit with no pesticides - not like the powdered shit the kids down the road were selling. They grew up and started their respective organic food businesses and then things got weird. “I think it’s so great that you’re still so into macaroni and cheese as an adult,” Amy tells Annie. “You’re keeping it simple. I really respect that. And I totally won’t tell anyone that rabbit you use as your mascot got loose two years ago and was eaten by your German shepherd. That would be such a public relations nightmare! Ha! I would never, ever do that!” Annie responds by telling Amy that it’s completely awesome that she’s managed to make soup, the world’s blandest food, even blander by taking all the salt out of it. That she’s making the world a better place for responsible, risk-averse eaters. And that it’s really actually a good thing that her frozen lasagnas cook down into two-inch squares of hardened cheese, because really, whose arteries need more pasta than that?

And so they continue on, the greatest frenemies the health food world has ever known.

Judith Lloyd, 3/2/2014

Quick sketches of dreams

1. My sister threw a jar across the room. The jar was made of ocean glass. The jar was thick, it didn't look broken. I picked it up, my mother needed it. The jar was broken on the hidden side. My hand bled, I closed my fingers and fell forward. It shouldn't be so bad, I thought. I only cut my hand, I thought, and blacked out.
2. The house was small and largely empty. School was out for winter break. You took me aside and took me aside again, but there was always someone else and never a door. We slept in wool sweaters near the unlit fireplace facade.
3. It's not really an emergency, the operator told me. Shame on you for wasting our time, she said. Listen, I told her, listen, people are dying this very minute--
4. I walk around the corner at the Hanover Park community center. The lights are out. I have a Mauve Sideshow album. There's a maze of cardboard walls, spray painted black. Plastic spider rings hang from the ceiling. Everyone else is dressed up like vampires. I decide the only way to work through our issues is to act out horror movies.
5. The minotaur lives in the racket ball pit.
6. I'm lost in the basement in a maze of institutional rooms. Everything is the color of old concrete. The walls are stained and streaked. Sometimes I'm not wearing clothes. I know the locker room that empties into the pool is around here somewhere, but can't seem to find it.

7. There's a spiral in the parking lot landscape, stone pieced together into a dramatic display. The grounds spread out for miles around us. I've been here many times before, in earlier dreams. I'm never sure I'll be able to find it again until I am here.

8. Doctors cluster around my x-rays. The project one on the screen. My body has become riddled with geodes, the result of unexpressed creative energy. Everyone is very concerned.

9. It turns out I wrote an episode of my favorite television show. I wonder if I could use this on my resume.

10. I'm paging through an old composition notebook. Dollar bills keep falling out, all of them filthy to the touch. I suspect the Mafia. I'm not sure what to do.

11. The nurse walks away with Tracy. I wander through the clinic. The halls get darker until I'm in the back most part of a chapel. There's a row of vigil candles on and some overstock hair accessories. An old woman with a black scarf tied at her chin sits with me while I wonder how Tracy will ever find me again.

12. Waiting rooms wallpapered with sky.

13. I'm making boxes inside boxes inside boxes.

14. An old man sits in his stall at the market long after it closes, staring into the empty darkness. His body rapidly disintegrates; oddly illuminated, his clothing hangs in space.

15. As I am going to a place I only go to in dreams, I wonder if I have dreams about going to one of the places I only go to in dreams when I am planning to visit here.

16. Scrying, I ask if I am in the right place. A child will mean yes, an old woman no. An image materializes on the surface: white haggard tresses clouding around the laughing face of a child.

17. I walked to the post office with a letter for my sixth grade crush. He's waiting ahead of me in line. He glances back, quickly turning away, embarrassed to see me.

18. Raining inside the mall. I kept checking back through the week, certain it couldn't still be raining, but it was.

19. I needed to write the dream down, but the notebook was filled with old poetry. I couldn't find my way through to a blank page.

20. My father opens the patio door to reveal the backyard. Hot wind blows. Children run out of view. He shuts the door, then opens it a second time. Now it's pouring, water blasting the lawn flat. Aghast and filled with awe, I step back. The third time he opens the door, the rain had stopped. A tornado bears down three blocks away, coming

straight for us. I pull back, almost calm, then scream myself awake.

Adri Holt, 3/2/2014

Whenever the weather gets bad around these parts (Saint Louis & Cape Girardeau), people tend to overreact. If the meteorologist forecasts a snow storm coming then in a few days' time before the storm hits, most stores are packed with panicky people. They grab milk, eggs, bread, the basic food staples for an American meal. So if you try and go to the grocery store a day before the storm is allegedly going to hit, these food staples are usually sparse.

I haven't gone with this craze before but have instead observed the catastrophe of the effects that the weather man's grave warnings have done to the populace of these areas. Unfortunately, the latest weather forecast of a snow storm has unsettled me and so I asked my husband if I should pick up some groceries before the weather became bad. He just gave me a look (he already knew the answer to the question he would ask of me) and asked me why I would want to do that. Which I then answered with that the weather was supposed to become bad to drive in. Ben thought I was silly for becoming caught up in this bad weather craze with the rest of the people who live here.

But I think the reason that I've never had to worry about going along with the crazy bad weather crowd is that I've never had to worry about it before when I lived with my parents or when we lived with his parents. Now that it's just me and Ben, the responsibility to take care of ourselves is directly set upon our shoulders.

Our milk is old, we have eggs, there's no bread in the apartment, but we do have some leftover pizza and we also have butter.

The roads are mostly icy sleet that's been coming down for hours. Usually I drive Ben to work and pick him up after his shift is over, but tonight I just had no desire to drive in this weather and the road conditions. I've been driving for about 2 years and I have tried to avoid at all costs driving when it has snowed or the roads are slick with ice. Honestly, I don't like driving in the rain or when it's dark or really at all.

One time when I was younger and I still lived with my mom and dad and my sister wasn't married, it snowed a couple feet one winter. My family being late for lots of occasions, we were late on getting groceries before the snow hit the Saint Louis area. So, my mom made sure my sister and I were both appropriately dressed to walk the mile or so from our house to the Schnucks in Hampton Village. It's a fond memory, even though it was cold and there was a lot of snow, my mother, sister, and I threw snowballs at each other and played in the snow the whole way to the grocery store. Thankfully after we got the groceries, my dad braced himself and drove to the store to get us. That was a really

lovely snow day.

Judith Lloyd, 3/3/2014

There must be some way of conveying to my impulsive heart, my heart that acts even as my head is advising against it: my heart that might actually be a conspiracy of hormones and astrological transitions that

The versions of people I interact with in dreams in no way reflect the waking life reality of those described individuals.

These versions are interpretations.

These versions are symbolic representations.

These versions are much more likely to be aspects of myself or issues I am working on.

Not only do these individuals have different personalities than their dreamtime interpretations, they also have different--and unknown--motivations, desires, and experiences than what I dream. In fact, the motivations and desires with which I imbue them are ultimately more a reflection of my own--often unknown--motivations, desires, and experiences.

*

So now, I do what? So now I do some emotionally weighted soul searching? So I do it, I do it at last: I weigh my heart against a feather. Here is my heart. My heart tips the scale. My heart comes crashing to the work surface. Sometimes it feels like that heart of mine might punch right through the scale plate, take out the table top, take out the floor boards. Pierce that veil sealing us from Hades, my heart, my heart.

So I do what my optometrist told me to do in 1986--I set my eyes to the horizon. I adjust my focus to infinity. I'll write about bridges that aren't being crossed, I decide; I'll write lofty couplets about altered states. I'll contemplate the current manifestation of my candle shrine. The first opportunity I give myself to write about these other matters, what is it I find myself writing about?

Judith Lloyd, 3/5/2014

Have there really never been two identical snowflakes? It seems presumptuous to believe such a thing. Consider that we've only had the technology to photograph snowflakes since the late 19th century; consider that, in the span of time since

developing the technology, the number of individual snowflakes photographed probably couldn't fill somebody's basement chest freezer. Doesn't this seem a shallow sampling to draw from, considering a reality where a quantity of snowflakes beyond our ability to quantify has been falling to earth since before it had reproducing lifeforms? Arrogant, also, to assume that nature could not replicate itself to the subatomic particle, should circumstances necessitate it so. That we impose this romantic human ideal of self-expression and individuality on an incomprehensible force that could obliterate all vestiges of humanity in just a few short hours really says more about our limitations than those of nature.

Anita Fitzwater-Stevens, 3/6/2014

Yesterday was my four-year-old nephew's birthday. It was also my father-in-law's birthday. Thinking about their age difference is amazing to me. The technology alone is mind-blowing. Parker knows how to use a tablet, cell phone, laptop... My father-in-law, though more tech-savvy than most people in their 70s, is still more comfortable with his "dumb phone" and having a land line w/answering machine than with anything close to an iPhone. I can't help wondering how much things will change as Parker ages. By the time he's in his 70s, we may have those flying cars we've been wanting.

Personally, I'm reaching the point where communication via technology is feeling emptier. I started a snail mail exchange with a friend in Madison, WI and am loving it. I'm hopeful that it continues and even expands to include others. Ultimately, I'm happy with the technology that allows me to read more books but I'm ready to have something more real for other things.

Adri Holt, 3/7/2014

Today is the last day that I'm a teenager. Tomorrow I'll have lived for two whole decades. I've lived through Y2K, 9/11, both terms of George W. Bush's, and the 1st black president of the United States; Several boyfriends, dropping out of high school, working at the library, getting my GED, becoming engaged, going to community college (which I'm still doing), marrying my husband in a foreign country, and moving to another city. Right now it seems that all of what I listed isn't that much, but to a teenager, it is A LOT to deal with. So no more teen angst after tomorrow because I will no longer be able to say that I am a teenager. Lately a running joke between me and my husband is that he should have a lot of sex with me while he can still say that he's engaging in coitus with a teenager. (That seemed a little personal but we think it's funny.)

Does turning 20 make me an adult? I'm not so sure. Does it mean that I'll have to grow up overnight and have to start being a responsible citizen? Nah. People never really grow up anyway.

It's just a strange thought that after six years of being a teenager that tomorrow...I won't be. It also means that I'll be in the same age range as my husband for the first time since we've been together (he's in his mid-twenties). An advantage of being 20 is that it's only a year away from being able to legally drink. That's a perk, I guess.

The other day a few kids were loitering around my apartment (they didn't live there) and I told my sister that their loitering bothered me; she said that I sounded old. Her basically calling me "old", made me become a little worried about turning 20 (only for a bit). I am hoping that becoming a different number will bring good things. We'll see.

Matt Fitzwater-Stevens, 3/7/2014

Randa Jarrar, an Egyptian woman who is a self-described feminist, recently published an article on Salon.com called "Why I Can't Stand White Belly Dancers." The core of her message is in the piece's conclusion:

This dance form is originally ours, and does not exist so that white women can have a better sense of community; can gain a deeper sense of sisterhood with each other; can reclaim their bodies; can celebrate their sexualities; can perform for the female gaze. Just because a white woman doesn't profit from her performance doesn't mean she's not appropriating a culture. And, ultimately, the question is this: Why does a white woman's sisterhood, her self-reclamation, her celebration, have to happen on Arab women's backs?

This led me to pose a genuine question (not a rhetorical one) to some of my friends, motivated by genuine anger: "Why is this not, itself, the grossest racism?" To ghettoize access to culture, based on its originators, is objectively counterproductive. By her own logic, Jarrar is debarred from being a feminist, since the feminist critique is not Arab in origin.

In our dialogue, some of us also were baffled by the concept of "appropriation." As I looked into the matter, I found another article on everydayfeminism.com, "The Difference Between Cultural Exchange and Cultural Appropriation." It explains the line between sharing and "appropriation," finding that it is defined by respect. By that definition, Jarrar's argument fails again.

Jarrar simply assumes bad faith on the part of all whites who come to examine and learn from Arab culture, which is the very definition of racism. Jarrar also denies the right of

Western culture to adapt other cultures' ideas to its own conditions and truths, although those other cultures regularly adapt Western ideas. She provides no logical basis for that distinction.

Third-party observers point out that this piece might be clickbait—that is, a piece designed to provoke outrage, and thereby run up page views for the hosting site. If she wrote it cynically for that reason, she's even less worthy as a commentator than her vacuous prose merits. Regardless, her name is on this racist exercise permanently, and she'll have to bear its burden throughout her career.

Sara Stewart, 3/9/2014

I am in the process of writing a story about the fabulousness of staying at high-end beach resorts in a foreign country. Wishing I could make it an annotated version, the highlights of which might be:

-How much do I tip the guy who meets us at the car with a moist towel and a cocktail? Does he feel as silly as I do about his taking my little rolly suitcase and backpack – specifically tiny so as to eliminate checking bags or over-carrying – when I could clearly, as an able-bodied woman, bring them the handful of steps to our room myself?

-Our \$160/per person trip to a nearby national park, during which we boated down a river while our guide plucked his nose hairs in a small mirror and left us to shout out things like, “Uh, I think that’s a bird of some kind? In that tree there?”, is vastly inferior to the forty-buck bayou boat tour we took in Louisiana, in which the guides actually knew things, like where to find the alligators. However, the rice and beans we were served at our fancy lunch were, indeed, delightfully spicy.

-Why are all of you sitting around a swimming pool reading your Kindles when you are in a FOREIGN COUNTRY and just a stone’s throw over there is the ACTUAL OCEAN? And MONKEYS in the trees, for god’s sake? I just saw fucking newly-hatched baby sea turtles making their way out of the nest into the water! You will not happen across this phenomenon on the concrete next to the techno-playing sushi bar, I promise you!

-Pity the masseuse we spot two days in a row with her hands buried in the back fat of a sun-roasted executive type. But be glad you do not have to make his acquaintance, nor that of his grouchy-looking wife and children slumped at the kiddie pool nearby.

-When attending a seven-course private meal in an exquisite garden setting, you must come prepared with a bottomless supply of reverential adjectives with which to respond to the waiters’ lavish descriptions of each dish that is set down before you. Otherwise you will find yourself, increasingly desperately, crying, “That looks even MORE delicious

than the LAST delicious thing! Wow!” Also, by the seventh course you will be forcing down bites of things that, had they not been accompanied by six prior courses, you would have actually enjoyed.

-\$16 is too much for a bowl of oatmeal. (Even if someone else is paying for it because you have, improbably, found yourself in a profession that funds your being in this surreally beautiful location amidst people who seem to have no curiosity about said setting.) It just is.

Baxter Tocher, 3/9/2014

the aching, ticking seconds

invented by humans to measure time

as if such a thing could be measured.

the seconds fool us

they grow shorter when in pleasure

they extend when in discomfort, fear, loss or pain.

the tiny happy seconds cheat my evening as they fly off, impervious to attempts to slow them, my wristwatch recording their nonsensical progress at each glance as they shear leaving the past behind;

the long uncomfortable seconds drag themselves out endlessly, outstaring us with dark, malevolent anger, repulsive in every aspect, their dreadful slithering bodies laid out so as to prevent our lives from moving forward with any rational meaning.

we know these seconds and their guileful ways, but they confound us by changing duration, endlessly destroying the minutes, hours and days they fabricate as they leave.

the weeks are kinder, yes

the weeks have much less mischief about them, and appear more open to trust.

the months and years take their cues from the seconds:

fast

slow

fast

in processions, which by each random turn delight or disgust
until all that we have, all that is ours
is that next ineffable tick in yet another sequence of joyous or wasted moments.
this thing -
- why did we build it?

Judith Lloyd, 3/9/2014

And like that, and how. How we articulate, how we wonder. How we create ourselves from nothing. How we make an identity for ourselves even pressed from every side with the identities of others. What makes us, what ruins us. What it means. What it doesn't mean. What it could mean. In an absence of identity, we build ourselves up; we lay down the foundation by asking questions. Any number of questions, really, questions of ourselves, questions of others. Other questions are answered in the actions we take, in the person we choose to be. Who, or why, or how. When, again, and where.

Self-portrait: Maybe there is a story in the hair and sleep I have lost, never to be returned, never to flourish in the way I once understood. Once I combed oils and salves into my hair, root to tip: twenty-one years ago I washed my hair clean and fell asleep in the early afternoon. I dreamt of radio static, of being dragged down the bed slowly. When I woke, snow fell. Or: I woke to falling snow. Two days short of New Year's I sprawled naked on the bathroom floor and watched the ceiling like it could give me something.

I'm always looking up or looking out. I shift my focus and lose perspective. Sullen and bundled, I sat with a thirty year old yoga book on the living room carpet at two in the morning. I listened to a recording from a Gamelan performance festival. I rolled the leg of my navy sweatpants--stained with forgotten lip balm by a dryer cycle in the spring--so that they hit mid-calf. I sat in the lotus position with no direction, no schedule of positions, no idea. I thought: I'll learn the sun salutation. I'd seen my mother do it; maybe I could do it, too. Right now. At two in the morning. Listening to my Gamelan performance festival CD.

I am always ambitioning toward exercise and atmosphere. I fantasize about sitting at a desk. I imagine myself sitting in the lotus position, meditating in a way that does not leave me feeling like the chain store dollar mark out bin at the end of a high-traffic weekend, complete with merchandise broken beyond recognition in the strobing blue lights.

I like to pretend I'm someone who can be approached, someone who does not vanish into every encounter. I see myself opening the door. I see myself preparing a tray of tea.

I do not do these things, but I imagine. My life is a proxy, gloved hands manipulating a robot on the other side of the glass. Except: not even. The wind blows. It blew through the window cracks at my mother's house; it blasts around the apartment complex corners. The plastic duck taped around the dubious apartment windows in a kind of bomb shelter chic, it buckles inward with a flutter and a sigh.

Judith Lloyd, 3/10/2014

Waiting in hospital rooms and parking lots. Waiting before meetings and lunch. Waiting in an unfamiliar classroom at the beginning of a new semester. Waiting with a phone held to my ear: three rings, four. Waiting with anticipation, anxiety, dread. Hoping someone will pick up, hoping that they won't. Waiting with the exasperated understanding that you are probably waiting for whoever answers to put you on hold so you can wait that much longer.

Waiting in boredom, in frustration. Waiting with sadness, waiting for something sadder to happen: the way my family members all seemed so clear, so incredibly defined, under the florescent lights of the hospice room where we all waited for my grandmother to die. Wait for labor to start. Waiting for the next stage of a miscarriage. Waiting for your credit card to clear, waiting for a package in the mail. Waiting for a decongestant to take effect. Waiting, on the operating room table, for time to stop, for waiting to stop. Waiting to wake up four hours like two seconds later, surrounded by the people who've been waiting for you to return to them.

Waiting at the bottom of your bedroom door, the only blade of light in the room, for your parents to get home, for your father to leave with the babysitter, for your mother to quietly crack the door and come into the room; lean over you as you pretend to sleep, lean over you to place a kiss on your forehead; waiting as you anticipate the wool and perfume and cigarette smoke scent of her good coat, the faint clay of eyeshadow. Waiting at the corner where the English wing intersects with the north stairwell, knowing he's going to pass this way soon, trying to not look like you are waiting.

Waiting at the airport gate, mutually the best and worst place in the world, knowing you'll see him or remembering seeing him, sleeves chewed, eyes wet, headphones around your neck. Waiting to hear what that noise was in the news. Waiting for test results, for the final verdict of urine drawn lines on mammogram day. Waiting in line at the grocery store. Waiting for your love to get home from work. Waiting for a call back on a job interview; that point when you shift to waiting for a rejection email, sometimes not even getting that.

Defined waiting, a definite waiting period--versus waiting for something that might

happen, waiting to see if anything happens at all. Waiting for your ride to show up. Waiting for the commercial break to end. Waiting to feel something. Waiting to be sure; just, waiting. We are always waiting for something. We are usually waiting for several things. Things that might happen. Things that must happen. Things that will happen, though probably not in the way you expected.

Scott Turner, 3/12/2014

As a fan of music I like it when people craft a song that I can relate to. I appreciate most music even if it isn't up my alley. The one thing that works my nerves however is predictability in lyrics. I should not be able to guess every second line because every first line is cliché. I mean, I like some predictability in music... I know that if I buy a slayer album it is going to be heavy, or if I buy an AC/DC record it is going to have that signature AC/DC sound. I like that. I also like it when a song crafter builds something so well that we can almost anticipate a musical climax or an epically rhythmic riff change.

Last weekend I was listening to a CD from a local folk-rock group and the lyrics were so predictable it ruined the album for me. Without any knowledge of the story the singer was sharing, I knew, lyrically, exactly what was coming next. Eventually I shut it off, put it away, and then later, gave it away. They put so much time into their sound, their chops, their look, their whole vibe, but for what?

Alexander Koch, 3/14/2014

1.

As a child I spent an inordinate amount of time in the woods. There was one area behind our house, about half a mile back from the treeline, where there was a small quasi-valley full of birch, and beech, and maple, and oak. Down near the bottom, on what I would call the left side (because that is the direction it was in when I arrived to that area from my house) were blackberry bushes, a whole swarm of them creeping from the earth. Underneath the bushes was a series of openings, and tunnels through the shrubbery, within which we used to crawl and create elaborate forts. It was a fascinating place, in the summer time when all the leaves were on the plants and on the trees we were invisible – or so we thought.

Now I do not believe I would experience it the same. I am much older now, and have not seen that area in many years. But perhaps those shrubs are still there, next to the little pond, back in the woods. Perhaps. Or perhaps not. I do not know, and I think it would almost be sad to find out if they are in fact gone. It would take away that little piece of

childhood and the way I in which I remember it. But I can say for sure if it is all still there, pristine as it was in my youth, I would likely no longer fit in the pathways through the blackberry bushes.

2.

I.

It was an unnamed stream, near the base of Puzzle Mountain, bubbling three inches deep in some spots. The abundance of life on that august day was apparent as a frog leapt, in glory, into the water. Ferns grew wild, as if exploring the shoreline. Stones like age old pictures told the story of the water's edge; they lay out a path to cross upon. Bugs nibbled at whatever foods they found, and moss grew wet and fast. Birds chortled as I lay on a bed of soft grasses in the sun that drifted down through the canopy of pine, spruce, beech, birch, and maple. My mind, and the forest's spirits, encouraged to dream.

II.

I had been hiking for a day and most of a morning when I came off the side of Puzzle Mountain in western Maine. I had seen the Presidential range from the peak the day before, and meandered, crisscrossing the mountainside, towards the valley. I had left the trail some time before, and though I did not know it yet, was about to cross another. It was the bubbling of the brook that I first heard, and then saw. A frog jumped. Stones and pebbles showed me the rivulet's former path. In the Androscoggin watershed, it is likely this water would one day reach that great river. The air was filled with the sounds of birds, and insects, leaves rustling overhead, and my feet rustling the grasses below. Laying down I took the time to recognize the beauty in this pristine setting, took the time to listen, imagine, to almost feel the emotions of the forest. I reached my fingertips out to a patch of curved brotherella moss; it was soft and damp from the morning's dew.

3.

Writing is a struggle against silence. The silence is palpable at times, sitting, standing, crouching, pen in hand, paper in hand, or on lap, or on table; I spend time working thoughts out in my head. But now sometimes I just write, I don't bother to stop, to think, to let it drown me in its effort or let the un-penned page push me over with its great blankness. I just write. Perhaps the silence is struggling to keep control, the paper struggling against the pen, against the words. Then a sudden shift, the pianos in my mind begin to play, the words form: thoughts become pen strokes, paper becomes a canvas for language. I just write. Perhaps the silence is drowned out by a cacophony of

notes, a bounty of free flowing ideas coming faster than my hand will work, faster than the ink will run. Pause. Pause.

Restart. The thoughts flow again, and the piano plays, the wind howls, sun shines clumsily through the shades. I am sitting now, and scrawling madly to work the pen as fast as the mind. It is not possible. Some thoughts float free, float out into the ether, away from my hand, away from the now penned page. Thoughts, sub thoughts, multi directional thoughts, thoughts that branch out like the top of a tree, a canopy of thoughts; thoughts, sub thoughts, multi directional thoughts, thoughts that dig deep like the roots of a tree, a panoply of thoughts.

Thoughts of the elements fill my mind: the elements of writing, of the universe, of the mind itself striking out to the great unknown. Striking forth to find their home and fill the semi-penned page. Free writing softly, subtly, then as the pace picks back up again the pen strokes thicken, become slanted, faster, and sloppier. But the words are not sloppier, the word clauses, the sentences, the lines, they pick up and carry onward. They carry onward into the ether, onward onto the page. I just write. Pause. Pause. The piano keys roll. The writing flows. Writing is a struggle against silence, as Fuentes said, and the struggle is slowly being won writer by writer, pen by pen, page by page, strident moment by strident moment. Being strident is necessary, pushing oneself as one pushes the pen, to beat the silence and place words to the page.

4.

When I was a child I made a very important discovery. Out in the woods behind my house, where I often frequented, while mucking around in the sticks and leaves, the brush and dirt, I found the skull of a mouse. This skull was tiny with even tinier teeth; it was almost too fragile, too tiny to touch. It was tiny yet it leapt out at me from the undergrowth. I don't recall every detail of that moment, but I like to imagine it was almost smiling to me as if it were telling me its life story, its death story.

There were probably acorns about, and grasses. An old wooden fence, from a time now long past when the neighborhood had been a farm, stuck half-broken and mossy from the brush and denser vegetation nearby. There were almost certainly insects and arachnids about, leaves and dead leaves, wildflowers and summer sunlight streaming through the vegetation. The gigantic ash tree, which later we estimated to be close to 150 years old, was near as well. It was to my back, in fact. That tree was a delight in my childhood, and I often think about it still.

I often think of that mouse skull, too; I think of it for good reason. I kept that mouse skull until I was 27. That mouse skull, on that first day I came out of the woods,

clutching it delicately in my hand, became a fixture to me. I was a collector of all things related to the natural world back then, and this tiny mouse skull was no exception. I became very fond of it, and so clutching it, brought it back to my room. As a child I had many cacti inside my room. I tended them, albeit poorly at times, and re-potted them on occasion. Though I doubt many others besides my family ever noticed it or knew of its existence, I set it into one of my cacti pots and there it stayed, through at least one re-potting, many years of watering, and multiple moves later in my life. I kept it until August or September of 2011 when it was unfortunately squished during a re-potting of those cacti.

But I still remember it, and perhaps those memories will last. Perhaps those memories will outlive me, as I outlived that mouse, and as its skull outlived what in the wild would have been its natural time to decay and go back to the earth. It has gone back to the earth now, and writing that, realizing that, puts a smile on my face. We all go back to the earth eventually.

5.

The water splashed, playful and full of promise, down the mossy, rock-face. The little stream, once softly flowing, unstuck itself from the log that had been blocking its path – causing a build-up of excess water – so it could cascade wildly in that moment. It left its old trajectory, sashaying to the side of its former route, tumbling with glee down the small cliff over the *Dicranum scoparium*.

I stood, silently watching its movement from a few yards away, a light colored damselfly swung by through the air, over the moss and rivulets of water; the damselfly curved in the air, past me, and it was gone into the mesh of *Abies balsamea*, *Tsuga canadensis*, and the prolific *Picea rubens*.

The stream, no longer flowing wildly across the rocks and moss, sputtered onwards towards what were sure to become larger streams, rivers, ponds, and lakes as each molecule of water worked its way eastward towards the Atlantic Ocean.

I wandered off, glancing back occasionally for a last glimpse of that place, that moment.

Matt Fitzwater-Stevens, 3/14/2014

There's a joke that's been passed around the Internet over the years, that compares societies by analogizing them to a guy who owns two cows. In a Communist society, the state would take both cows and give you some milk. In a Fascist society, the state would take both cows and sell you the milk. And so on. Over time, people have added

to the list: Greece would borrow lots of euros to build a panoply of elaborate dairy facilities, but still would have only two cows. France would go on strike, because it wanted three cows; but at the end of the day it still would only have two cows.

Recent events inspire me to add my own analogies:

NEW JERSEY

You and your brother have two cows.

Because you have a petty beef with your brother, you put up an endless maze of corrals and gates, just to make milking your cows a pain in his ass.

Meanwhile, your neighbor has eight million cows. He shakes his head and decides never to do business with you.

ARIZONA

You have two cows.

You erect a giant billboard in front of your hamburger stand, vowing never to sell burgers to people who violate your religious beliefs. It makes you feel good.

90% of your potential customers are creeped out and go to the McDonald's next door.

Anita Fitzwater-Stevens, 3/15/2014

I restarted a long-term hobby of researching my family tree this week. I'd started it years ago, when resources online were much harder to come by, and let it go by the wayside. Picking it back up again now, I've been able to find real records and primary documents for a lot of question marks.

That can be a double-edged sword, though. One relative fought in the Revolutionary War. Another had slaves and was arrested for being a Confederate sympathizer. The spectrum of ethics, time, geography--I'm running into a lot of it. Things change, depending on where you're standing and how you look at them, ethically speaking.

My own ethics mean that I'm Pagan and a vegetarian and a liberal. Will future generations be horrified that I owned cats and wasn't vegan? Maybe. Or maybe the pendulum will swing back the other direction and they'll be horrified at the liberality of my life.

Either way, all this research and new information certainly puts the relative nature of ethics out into the open.

Thomas Park, 3/16/2014

I always wanted to paint, and with some encouragement from my fiancée, I bought some supplies for acrylics. It's been really exciting so far.

The starter set was not expensive-- about 30 dollars. I quickly ran out of paint and canvasses, but I was able to try a few pieces.

I started by imitating-- there is a Rothko at the Saint Louis Art Museum, and I stole its color scheme. Torrey pointed out that the painting just looked like blended colors, so I added an abstract shape in a different hue.

Acrylics are nice in that you can always add more paint later.

I have painted about 10-12 pieces at this point. My brushstrokes are now more confident. Composition is more complex. I am getting lots of compliments online, and people are interested in purchasing pieces.

I am most proud of a large painting I did, two-and-a-half feet high, which is now hanging in our living room.

Acrylics are a safe and forgiving medium and I recommend them to anyone who has ever dreamt of being a painter.

Sara Stewart, 3/16/2014

This week I broached the topic of transitioning from full-time writing to freelancing, with my editor. Said I wanted to spend more time out of state with my boyfriend, which is accurate. Did not add that I wanted to spend more time not sitting down; not under fluorescent lights; not eating lunch in front of a computer; not crammed into a subway car at 9 in the morning between a man eating an odorous egg sandwich and a woman applying a full face of makeup. "But won't you miss the city?" said my editor, concerned. I thought about it. This city has been good to me: there aren't that many places where you can be this resolutely set against age-appropriate behavior and not only get away with it but get rewarded for it. Pop cultural obsession is only viable currency in a few concentrated areas, and this is one of them. But it's gotten harder and harder to rationalize the sacrifices. I commute an hour into the city each day, and another hour home at night, because it's impossible to live alone in any reasonably convenient

Brooklyn neighborhood on a writer's salary. I don't love cars, but I now fetishize personal space. I dream of not having to have daily morning encounters with mariachi bands and bucket drummers, of not having to keep my headphones constantly in my ears to fend off – mostly - the sound of countless other peoples' blaring headphones. I work on the ninth floor of a building whose windows don't open - and which you certainly wouldn't want to open if they did. I have a job title I always dreamed of - and I live in a studio apartment at the age of 41. I can hear my upstairs neighbor's television set and my downstairs neighbor bangs on her ceiling with a broom if I turn on a fan. I rush into my job daily to sit on my chair at my desk in my cubicle so I can write things that go, primarily, into the ether of online; the fact of my being physically there seems mostly to maintain the semblance of a kind of workplace that disappeared a decade or two ago. I still love New York, maybe mostly in theory - but I think it's time we took some time apart.

Adri Holt, 3/17/2014

Really my love for reading started in the womb. My mom used to read to my sister every night even when she was pregnant with me. A story my mom likes to tell is that when I was 3 months old that I stopped breast feeding and was trying to look at the book that she was reading to my sister and me. I could read pretty well by the time I was 4 and was above most people in my classes in reading levels. As I got older, my love for reading continued and I read like a fiend. Book after book, hour after hour. I stayed up late a lot of the time when I was younger because I was so engrossed in a book that I didn't want to stop. Every year I signed up for the summer reading club at the library near my house. It was usually easy to get through the list pretty fast to get my prizes.

I began to read mangas (Japanese comic books) when I was in my early teenage years. Then when I was 16, I got a job at the library that I had visited hundreds of times during my childhood. It was a great job because I was surrounded by books all the time and my co-workers were wonderful. I always got a little distracted because of all the books around me. I stayed at the library for almost 2 years before I got my GED and began college. Unfortunately, even though I was getting an education, my love of reading slacked off a bit. Only now have I actually been able to get into a book well enough that I couldn't put it down.

I've bought quite a few books for my unborn niece and I hope that she inherits my love for reading since my sister wasn't the biggest fan of reading. I hope to read to her before she goes to bed whenever I'm at my sister's house.

Reading is great for so many reasons. You're living a story, learning something, traveling to faraway lands or time traveling to the future or past, and whenever someone else may

fall you, there are always books.

Baxter Tocher, 3/17/2014

People seem to have created “days”, “weeks” and “months” to raise awareness of almost everything.

For example, International Talk Like a Pirate Day is on September 19th every year. This is one I don’t observe, but I know quite a few folks that do.

For some reason, around half of the cats in the care of the Cats Protection charity in the UK are black or black and white. A one-off instance of Black Cat Awareness Day in the UK in 2011 was so popular that it became an annual event, National Black Cat Day, held on 31st October here in the UK and 17th August in the US (why the different days?). It’s really for both black and black-and-white cats. Living with one black and one black-and-white cat, Frisco and Cody, I do celebrate this one. Rather, I observe it - they celebrate it by being their usual good-natured, sleepy selves.

Some of these occasions are clearly just set up for fun. Examples from the US include National Chocolate Colored Raisin Day (March 24th), Classical Music Month (September), National Piano Month (also September), National Cheeseburger Day (September 18th), National Baklava day (November 17th). Music and food, eh? Great!

Lots of health awareness events cover everything from fairly mild health conditions to very serious, long-term, incurable illnesses. Being made aware of these is a good thing. Sometimes I’ll read about a health condition that I haven’t heard of, and will go off to do a little research around the web to find out more about it. In these cases, the objective has been achieved. They’re useful.

One massive, awful omission in all of these observations, celebrations and awareness programs, though, is a National Murder Awareness Day. It seems that on April 4th, 2001, in the US, for that one day only, such an event was designated and observed. Now, according to official figures, there were 14,827 instances of murder and nonnegligent manslaughter in the United States in 2012 . Hold that thought, please.

The population of the US as at 31 June 2012 (mid-year, for a fairer figure) was 314,082,841 . One in 21,000-odd people in the US met their death by homicide in 2012. By way of contrast, there were 552 cases of homicide in England and Wales in 2011/12, 62 in Scotland, and 16 in Northern Ireland in 2012, giving a figure of 630 for the whole of the UK. The UK population was estimated to be 63.7 million in mid-2012. One in 101,000-odd people in the UK met their death by homicide in 2012. A startling difference.

But - imagine if a National Murder Awareness Day made even one person think about the senselessness of the action they were about to perform. It'd be worth it, right?

Matt Fitzwater-Stevens, 3/21/2014

My wife and I are near-future parents. It's not like Anita's pregnant, or will be pregnant any second; but we can see the day coming when we will start a family. This means that how we raise our kids isn't just an abstract question. We think and talk about it regularly; and we talk with our relatives about it, too.

Anita's sister, who is a Missionary Baptist, sent us an article about adolescents and religious belief, written by a pastor from a similar background. The article, "If You Have Kids that Go to College, They Probably Don't Go to Church!" by Arliss Dickerson, has value that transcends sectarian lines.

The article's title doesn't do justice to its substance. Rev. Dickerson is right that a young adult's openness to spiritual growth is a function of her prior spiritual life. There's no magical trick that can suddenly awaken interest in religious thought at age 18 if there's been no investment in it from ages 0 to 17.

There's another part of the equation: Does the college offer a stimulating spiritual environment? Can the student integrate faith into his life without going to ridiculous trouble to find community, or segregating himself? Or is his college a big wasteland of frats and beer?

A good thing about my years at Georgetown University was that you could pursue community and inquiry across a variety of faiths, with your friends, on campus, in and out of class. I could (and did) study Asian religions and Judaism in the daytime, and sang in the midnight Mass choir every Sunday, while going to bars and doing the other silly things that college kids do. I didn't have to give short shrift to my majors to do that, either. And, we weren't pounded over the head with it—religion was available if you wanted it, and reflective folks self-selected into it. Not only did I have a great opportunity to explore faith, but I gained a model for how to keep faith and spiritual inquiry in your life as a busy adult. Not every college does that, but the ones that do provide a huge, lifelong gift...one well worth thinking about when our kids are older and are gearing up for their lives after high school.

Thomas Park, 3/22/2014

The painting is coming along well.

When I talk with people about painting, I learn a lot about ideas of art. One person asked me if the paintings connoted a narrative. Others had ideas about how full the canvas was of paint, or whether paintings could be similar each time.

That brings up a difficulty-- I have refined certain brushstrokes and techniques, and I use them a lot. It's like I am doing versions of the same painting each time.

I tried diluting paint and "splattering" it on the canvas. That was fun, though only one of 3 attempts worked out. The one that worked, no one liked.

So I need to find new ways of adding paint to the canvas-- I don't want to get stuck in a rut.

I am definitely gaining an appreciation of other painters and their works.

Anita Fitzwater-Stevens, 3/22/2014

Everyone needs to feel they have a purpose. Since my nephew, Alex, was born in 2000, being an aunt has been a big part of what I see mine as. My very conservative and religious family--they're people who mean well but don't always do well. My coming out as bisexual and then as a Pagan were tough experiences. Well, for an adult, it was tough. If any of my nieces or nephews face similar rejection, I imagine "tough" wouldn't adequately describe it.

A campaign of harassment and ostracism went on for about two years when I came out. There is no level of loneliness that equals that experience.

I have a personal vow that none of these children will ever have to endure something like that. I'll be the exception, as I have been my whole life as far as my family is concerned. Sometimes that's the worst and best thing you can be at the very same time.

The reason this is the subject of this week's contribution is that my niece told me she feels alone often when I saw her last. She turns to nature, instinctively, as I found myself doing in my teen years. Does this mean she's discovering a leaning toward nature spirituality? I don't know yet. I do know that it tells me I need to step my efforts with her. And I know that as she keeps growing, my hope is that her feelings of alone-ness, of difference, won't grow with her but that she'll find a place she belongs.

Adri Holt, 3/23/2014

A memorable quote by Albert Camus comes to mind when the subject of friends comes

up and it says, "Don't walk behind me; I may not lead. Don't walk in front of me; I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend."

Whenever I go on Facebook, there are a lot of statuses that talk about people finding out some of their friends were actually friends or that they need to delete friends because of negativity, etc. It makes me think that people just don't care anymore about others. People can be selfish, negative, dishonest, and really just out for themselves. A lot of the time, you have to reconsider old friendships and wonder if the relationship that you may have previously had is worth salvaging. But, if the "friend" doesn't bother to keep you in their lives, always puts you down, or makes you feel guilty, then maybe that person isn't worth keeping around.

Friends should be honest with each other, have some common interests, be encouraging, be there for the other, actually care about what happens to the other one, and there's a lot more attributes that a good friend should be. Every friendship is different but the traits I listed above should definitely be a part of your relationship with your friend.

I've made a lot of good friends over the years. Some have come and gone. There are several people that I can truly call "friend". Moving away from them has made me miss my friends so much and I try and make time for all of them because they're an important part of my life.

They're fun to talk to and hang out with, they accept me for who I am, they tell me the truth even when it's hard to hear, and they love me, and I reciprocate. I can never repay them for being there for the crazy mess that I feel like I am. They're such good people and amazing friends. I am so lucky to have them in my life.

Everyone needs a friend once in a while. Someone to share their thoughts, dreams, ideas, beliefs, etc. They need someone who they don't have to pretend around or put on a mask with. People need a friend to act goofy with, to laugh and be crazy. Someone who they can cry on. But, they need to put the same effort into the friendship or it won't work very well and may fizzle out.

I remind my friends a lot that they're special to me. 'Cause friends are important and if they're in your life, why not tell them how much they mean to you?

Baxter Tocher, 3/24/2014

air

that sound

that music
familiar, unfamiliar
lifts us up and carries us
lightly
effortlessly
invisibly.
we leave the physical
we leave the present
time bends, distorts, cheats
input: instruments moving air
output: loudspeakers moving air
wood
fabric
metal
wire
amp on heavy glass
electronics.
we travel backwards in time
listening to memories
hearing the past
that sound.

Judith Lloyd, 3/24/2014

Scrape the cover clean and re-imagine it once more.

It's what I do with my journals every time I write an entry: create a new context in which I write a journal entry. In which I write something in a journal, whether it is an entry or

not. In memory I've date stamped an entry and hovered the nib of my pen over the page for minutes without anything further to ink out; ended up writing about the foolishness of starting an entry when I had no entry to start. Here the context seems to be the importance of putting down words even when I have--when I believe I have--nothing to write about.

As it turns out, there are times when an absence of concept means more valuable concepts, those I have ignored in favor of concepts that seemed more flashy or urgent, have the opportunity to come forward. The trance of stringing together a phrase that doesn't seem to apply to my immediate situation or any situation in general; initiating an entry by playing a version of exquisite corpse with myself. The next sentence written without a clear memory of the sentence prior. Didn't I have a project like that in mind? There's always another project, somewhere in mind. Or, rather, let's hope some variables of that statement are generally the truth.

Sentence: a formally structured combination of words intended to bring a concept from formlessness into something that can form the thoughts of another.

Sentence: the consequences defined by authority upon one convicted of a crime.

These meanings seem almost comically arbitrary to me, an allegory waiting to be made, a story waiting to be told. Isn't this the sort of thing I'm supposed to get ideas from? The demon of wordplay. The angel of wordplay. Either would work as either type of sentence, I guess. Glory, glory.

How many clever things have I written because I needed to avoid a word I didn't know how to spell? I guess this reveals the evolutionary nature of creativity, the practical purpose creativity serves: accomplishing something meaningful in the absence of perfection. Knowing your shortcomings enough to use them productively. Drawing confidence from your mistakes. It's a path, of a sort, the path made by stumbling over your own feet. There's a kind of rhythm to it to the stops and starts, a song you won't hear anywhere else. The words you couldn't spell might become a new language. The stories you can't tell in a way anyone else would tell them become your own voice, the revelation of your true nature.

Sara Stewart, 3/24/2014

A blog post called "New York Doesn't Love You" has been making the rounds over the past couple days. It reads, in part, "New York is a penal colony. The rivers and oceans are natural moats keeping the maniacs in, and the rest of the country relatively safe... New York is fighting over a discarded table left out on the street at 5AM with an ancient grandmother who could bench press a compact car. She wins."

Here are some other things that New York is.

New York is a small child kicking your seat through the whole redeye from one side of the country to the other.

New York is a dog that throws up on your new carpet, but then eats the vomit. But then vomits it back up again.

New York is a scratchy tag on the back of your new T-shirt that you can't seem to completely cut out because if you remove those last lingering threads it will probably put a hole in the shirt, and you paid 50 goddamn dollars for it like an idiot.

New York is pad thai that you ordered spicy and took a bite of and realized they made it actually really fucking spicy, not pandering-to-Americans spicy, so it's delicious but also completely inedible.

New York is the final episode of "True Detective," where your stomach hurt the whole time because you were so tense but then you thought about it afterward and it had answered almost none of your big questions and all that symbolism you read into everything was you, not it.

New York is making the decision to order the third martini of the evening.

New York is a pair of Frye boots that are so buttery-leathery-beautiful and despite the fact that you've owned them for three years and are still apparently in the process of "breaking them in," you wear them all the time in excruciating pain because you can't resist how awesome they look.

New York is a Facebook status update about how it had the most perfect, wonderful day full of sunshine and healthy but really delicious too kale salad and windfalls of cash and it just wishes you had been there because it was so amazing.

New York is Keyser Soze.

Judith Lloyd, 3/24/2014

An intention of journals, a bitter of bills, a wayward of weekend afternoons.

*

My second niece at her second birthday party: runs for presents, cheers for cake. Opens the presents, refuses the cake. Lately she's taken to refusing Ben on sight - "No," she'll say, as if he's injured her before and cannot be trusted. "No," she'll say, sometimes even as she presses him to stay.

It's a difficult business when the baby ignores you, won't say your name on cue, won't give you the hug she's given everyone else in the room. You try not to take it personally, but it feels like it reveals some terrible hidden truth about your character, when the baby doesn't acknowledge you, or, worse, indicates that she doesn't want you in the room. I suppose it's the opposite response to when the baby lights up at seeing you, shouts your name in affirmation, anxiously asks after you when you aren't in the room.

A few weeks back, during a visit, I sat in a half-lotus on the front room floor. My niece beamed, grabbed one of her favorite books, bopped over and cuddled up in my lap so I could read to her. We may not have read the whole book (in all honesty, "Puppy is at the park! Puppy sees something by the tree! What does Puppy see by the tree? Let's take a look by the tree! Oh look, Puppy sees a bluejay! Do you see the bluejay? Do you see the bluejay by the tree? Puppy will say something! What do you think Puppy will say?" doesn't seem like especially scintillating narrative even for a toddler, though who am I to judge?) but for a moment, I felt confident in my value as a human being: because the baby liked me, because the baby sought me out, because the baby validated me.

What a racket.

Judith Lloyd, 3/27/2014

Remembering the process. So convinced I know the answers, especially when I clearly do not. I can be overly literal in my readings, or I remember and unnecessarily prioritize strange and inconsequential details. Several times during my cancer adventure, doctors responded to my questions by saying, "Huh, no one's ever asked me that before." I am detail oriented--no, detail obsessed. At times I can only see details.

Because of this, resumes and bylines, writing that requires a broader approach, can feel nearly impossible. I can't just explain that I am a refined and disciplined writer and offer a two brief examples to illustrate; instead, I offer fifteen at unnecessary length. I must quantify, qualify, attempt to approach the matter from several unique perspectives. My Facebook comments go on for days. Instead of beauty in quick brushstrokes, I must move in close for photographic realism; I must record every pore.

Maybe I just need practice? Practice, then:

Judith Lloyd lives and eats cheese in Baltimore.

Judith Lloyd is 38 and mostly jobless. However, we are hopeful that she'll get her act together eventually.

Judith Lloyd obviously has high expectations for her readers. So get on that, then.

If you'd like to reach Judith Lloyd, good luck, she is known to go into mild panic attacks at Facebook message notifications and will let emails go unanswered for weeks.

Judith Lloyd lives in Baltimore. Judith Lloyd lived in Iowa City for two years and got a BA from the university there several years later. You'd like to think there's a good reason for this, but there really isn't. Her mother still loves her, you know.

Look! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Judith Lloyd!

Judith Lloyd consumes too much sugar and has alienated most of her friends. It's okay, though, because she has cheese! Usually.

Maybe someday we'll meet, have something to say to one another. Maybe some day we'll wrap ourselves around each other, teach each other new names, names that describe us better, names that answer our deeper concerns in life: names we have earned. And so, shorn of our old identities; our old identities tangled at our feet in braids, in twists, in half formed locks -

Lock: A strand of hair, formed into a curl. May be attached to the head of the one who grew it or lovingly twisted into a locket, a specialized container for containing trinkets related to the Beloved, if not actual pieces of the Beloved. Locket, in fact, may have been named for either a lock of hair or -

Lock: A device attached or built in to a way of entry to prevent entry. Can assist in intimacy, isolation, or in some cases claustrophobia. A locket may represent all three scenarios at once, obviously. Locks can provide comfort or terror, depending on your side of the door.

Anita Fitzwater-Stevens, 3/28/2014

This month's salon (an effort I started organizing this spring to get people talking more face-to-face) was about feminism. To my pleasant surprise, the turnout was great and discussion went well beyond the time I'd set in my head for it. The seven of us talked over feminism's past and present for over three hours.

It was exactly the experience I hoped the salons would create. Passionate discussion about REAL issues and life. It was, in fact, a real highlight of the week for me.

I started calling myself a feminist back in junior high school. I liked the word. Feminist. Feminist... I also applauded the idea that women should be getting the same treatment men got. Especially in Southeast Missouri, that was a radical concept.

Still is, sadly.

But I keep hoping. When I see little boys creating "fairy superhero" costumes for themselves or my niece talking about science being her best subject in school, my feminist heart leaps a bit. I think, eventually, there'll be laughter at the idea that feminism was radical. Someday, that is.

Matt Fitzwater-Stevens, 3/28/2014

It's tough to sort "history" as modern people understand it from narratives as they were recorded in older times, including by the inspired (in Christian eyes) writers of the Old Testament books. In both my theology and history courses, we learned that ancient narrators prioritized conveying moral truth. The versions of stories that they passed down to us were designed to serve those moral truths, even if they had to foreshorten or edit factual details.

In this respect, the inspired writers operated like Hollywood screenwriters who have to distill complex and awkward historical events into something that conveys the essence of the truth, in a way that's digestible by average folks in a reasonable length of time. Just think of all the details of Jesus' life that were lost when Matthew, Mark, Luke and John had to pick out the high points for short Gospels that could be shipped worldwide.

There are many legends outside of the Bible that tell a similar tale of a great flood and its survivors. These are spread across a remarkably broad range of cultures. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that *something* of that sort happened. But the version that comes down to us through the Bible is unique. It stresses fidelity to God, faith in His promises, perseverance in right action despite secular ridicule, the power of God's wrath. It also, again uniquely, shows God's love, remorse, and commitment to mercy, in the covenant memorialized for all time by rainbows.

This Biblical version tells us much about the Judeo-Christian God, with a narrative that no other version has. That last detail--the rainbow seal--perfectly illustrates how it works. We know, scientifically, that rainbows come from light refracting through water mist. We've all created our own rainbows with garden hoses. But historical, scientific fact was beside the point for the inspired writer. He was using poetry to make a moral point. After every storm, there is peace and a rainbow. With his beautiful narrative, he made certain that anyone who heard it would think of God's love and mercy after a storm...and understand.

Judith Lloyd, 3/29/2014

Judith Lloyd is a unicorn, goddamnit. And don't you forget it.

Downstairs as early as I could muster, sometimes hours before anyone else was awake - though somehow, almost never early enough to catch the Smurfs? - I'd wrap myself in the orange saffron afghan and watch Saturday morning cartoons. Are there still Saturday morning cartoons? As they were, I mean, in 1983? In this age of streaming video and one-click recording, I am dubious. Saturday morning cartoons would have gone the way of music on the radio: too much freedom leading to no profitable options; no corporation willing to take a risk on something that won't flood a stadium with screaming fans, the surviving options become an interchangeable single note that doesn't vary from one channel to the next.

Or: maybe I'm wrong, maybe cartoons on Saturday morning are different than music on the radio because television found the perfect formula in 1983 and nothing has changed since. I remember cartoons set in abandoned houses, laboratories, bleak cityscapes. I remember bizarre and occasionally terrifying live action late morning specials that dealt with ghosts and Hitchcockian obsession. I remember earth tone color motifs, nothing brighter than burnt orange for minutes at a stretch - but still, the grating and repetitious Hanna-Barbera scoring that you never noticed until it had been stuck in your head for half a decade. And I remember incredibly well-drawn cells that had been, even by my second grade standards, animated badly. All of us remember that. It may have been one of our generation's overriding truths.

Somehow, I don't think cartoon mornings are like that any longer. There's an obliterating excess of media. Too many options. Everything is so customizable, now, that happening on something by chance is an increasingly outdated notion. Had I been building my consumer profile based on recommendations and viewer history instead of flipping through the channels because The Littles were showing a rerun I found tiresome, I probably wouldn't have watched a program where the cast was characterized by muscle contours and superhero bikinis; I wouldn't have watched He-Man or ThunderCats at all - but, instead, would've vanished entirely into my hopeless obsession with sad domesticated animals who could talk. Puppies and parakeets. Kittens and meerkats. Am I better for the random introductions this lack of control offered? Or am I fragmented, unable to unify my own brand, just generally more distracted because of this?

Thomas Park, 3/30/2014

We had to put our cat Emma to sleep this weekend.

To be more precise, my fiancée (and her mother) did it. I had to work.

Emma was a nice cat, but she had issues.

She wandered around constantly, crying in an eerily human voice. She cried often at night, for hours on end, keeping my fiancée awake.

She did not seem to like being held or petted-- only on certain occasions. Usually, she curved her back and slipped out of whatever grasp you might have had on her.

Emma seemed uncomfortable most of the time. We know she was developing a thyroid condition.

Still, this was very sad for us.

Right now, the apartment has strange, peaceful quality. It's also a bit uncanny. We're just not sure at this point what we've done.

But I think it was right. R.I.P. Emma.

Adri Holt, 3/31/2014

Writer's block is one of the most feared things in the writers universe. Just to be stuck on a sentence or just the right word, possibly how the story is going to continue or what rhymes with 'oranges'(nothing does). It's incredibly frustrating. Sometimes when my brain decides to work correctly, I'm able to use larger, multi-syllabic words and people are always surprised by this. It's just, the words are somewhere in my brain (they really are), but, they don't always come out in the right order or the words get jumbled together and it doesn't sound right. That kind of thing unfortunately happens on a regular basis. I feel like I'm mistaken for an idiot when it happens, it's just the human brain is a fragile thing and anything can set it off in the wrong direction or wires get mixed up and communication becomes an exhausting ordeal.

Anyway, writer's block for me has happened on quite a few occasions. When I was going through my old room at my parents' house, I happened upon multiple stories that I began to write but never finished. Poems that had no endings, characters that were stuck in time and space, etc. There were a couple of stories that I collaborated on with friends that we never ended. Having a bit more time on my hands as of late, I've thought about writing again, it always was enjoyable for me. There's the trouble of thinking the story is not good enough, not very original; the thought that nobody would be interested in reading it anyway and those thoughts always created the problem of stopping where I was in writing whatever and it doesn't ever have an ending. That would be part of writer's block for me.

My mother has told me on multiple occasions that she enjoys my writing and even when I was sending out thank you cards for my wedding reception, people told my parents that the things I wrote in the cards were very heartfelt. The letter I wrote my sister the

other day for her baby shower was something she loved and laughed about and definitely something she wanted to keep. I've sent a few stories that I've begun to write to friends and I even sent the last entry about "friends" to my sister and another friend and they both likes it a lot. My sister cried when she read it, but that's due to pregnancy hormones.

I like to write, I really do. It's something that I truly enjoy. I've enjoyed this project very much and want to thank Thomas for including me in such a wonderful collaboration. (: